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Austria: Incidents of police brutality continue

The Austrian authorities continue to ignore serious incidents of police brutality and have failed to end the ill-treatment of detainees, Amnesty International said in a report launched in Vienna today.

Supported by eyewitness reports and medical evidence, detainees have reported being repeatedly kicked, punched, kned, beaten with truncheons and sprayed with pepper after restraint. The victims are mostly non-white foreign or Austrian nationals and in many cases police are alleged to have used racist language.

In May last year, a 25-year-old Nigerian asylum-seeker, Marcus Omofuma, was deported by three police officers from Vienna airport. On the aeroplane, he was allegedly gagged and bound 'like a mummy stuck to the seat' with adhesive tape. He did not survive the journey.

In November 1998, Dr C, a black Austrian citizen, was stopped by police after reversing his car into a one-way street and was asked "Why are you driving the wrong way, Nigger?" The police officers reportedly pushed Dr C into a bush of thorns, beat him unconscious, handcuffed him and continued to beat him after he regained consciousness. Dr C's wife claims one of the police officers shouted to his colleague; "Make him lame until he can no longer walk". After being arrested, Dr C was so badly beaten, he was taken to hospital where he spent 11 days recovering.

"Investigations into police ill-treatment have been slow, lacking in thoroughness and often inconclusive. In the 1998 - 1999 period very few perpetrators of human rights violations were brought to justice. To add insult to injury, counter-charges such as resisting arrest, physical assault or defamation were often brought against detainees who lodged complaints of ill-treatment against police officers," Amnesty International said.

Police officers entered a Chinese restaurant in July 1998 and demanded identity papers from employees. The cook, a Chinese national, was reportedly dragged out of the kitchen, beaten and put into a headlock for not producing his papers. One of the waitresses, He Xiuzhen, tried to intervene and was pinned to the ground and hit on the breast. In self-defence she tried to attack the police officer with her shoe but he allegedly beat her with her other shoe. Another waitress involved in the incident, He Xiuqin, later lodged a complaint as did the police officers who complained of physical assault and resisting arrest, as a result of which the three detainees received suspended prison sentences.

In November last year the UN Committee against Torture reviewed Austria's Second Periodic Report to the Committee describing the measures it had taken to implement its obligations under the Convention against Torture. The Committee recommended that police be held to account for violations of human rights and they receive a clear message that abuse of power will not be tolerated.

Amnesty International believes that perpetrators of human rights violations are likely to become all the more confident when they are not held to account before the law. The organization is renewing its calls on the new Austrian government to seriously address the abuse of police powers by promptly and thoroughly investigating all incidents of ill-treatment, address racism in the police force, send a clear message to police that ill-treatment is unacceptable, and punish the perpetrators.

“The image of a brutal and sometimes racist police force is an ugly one. The Austrian government faces major embarrassment in Europe and abroad if it allows rogue police officers to beat people up and get away with it,” Amnesty International warned.

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For more information or a copy of the report, please call Amnesty International's press office in Vienna, Austria on + 43 1 7800824 or in London, UK, on +44 171 413 5566