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Slovakia: death of a Romani man in custody - renewed calls for decisive government action

The reported torture of three Romani men in police custody, one of whom died in suspicious circumstances, dramatically underlines the urgency of the situation facing the Romani community in Slovakia, Amnesty International said today in a letter to the Slovak government.

"Once again we call on the Slovak authorities to respect their commitments under international treaties and to protect the fundamental rights of all individuals in Slovakia, without discriminating on grounds of their race, colour, sex, language, religion, opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

Karol Sendrei died on 6 July while he and his two sons, Robert and Peter, were detained in Revúca police station. They had been arrested on 5 July 2001 in Magnezitovce after they complained about reported ill-treatment suffered by one of the two sons at the hands of the Magnezitovce mayor's son, who is a police officer. Upon their arrest, the three Roma were reportedly beaten by police officers who also allegedly hit Karol Sendrei's wife when she tried to intervene.

Karol, Robert and Peter Sendrei were initially taken to the police station in Jelsava. They were later examined by the doctor on duty in a hospital in Revuca who reportedly established that the detainees "had not suffered any serious damage to their health". The three men were then taken to the Revdca police station where they were reportedly beaten while tied to a radiator.

"One officer put a handgun to my head and when I screamed in pain that I would rather be shot, they told me that it would be a waste of a bullet and then continued to beat me," stated Robert Sendrei in a newspaper interview. "My brother and I noticed that our father was not moving and we called the police officers. However, when the doctor came he could not revive him. Father died there next to us, tied to the radiator." Following his release from the police station, Peter Sendrei was admitted to hospital with bruises all over his body.

"This is just one of numerous cases of police torture and ill-treatment of the members of Romani community we have been reporting over the years," Amnesty International said.

The organization has repeatedly expressed concern that investigations into such reports appear not to have been conducted thoroughly and impartially as required by international standards. The response of the Slovak authorities, if any, has been entirely inadequate even after the organization's findings were confirmed by the United Nations Committee against Torture, which issued in May 2001 extensive recommendations to the Slovak government.

"These recommendations must be implementing urgently," Amnesty International said. "This is not simply a matter of ensuring that the protection of the Romani community in Slovakia meets European standards -- it is also a matter of basic human decency."

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