

Human Rights League lodges complaints over Belgian deportation methods

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27 September 1999

The Human Rights League has lodged official complaints against two former Belgian Interior Ministers over the methods used by police during deportations. Sémira Adamu, a 20-year-old Nigerian asylum-seeker, was killed as a result of a violent deportation carried out by the Belgian authorities in September 1998.

Refugees and asylum-seekers resisting attempts to deport them from Belgium were routinely subject to a “cushion” technique. If they sought to draw attention to their plight by shouting out to other passengers, a cushion was placed over their mouths to muffle their cries. When the officers deporting Sémira Adamu carried out this procedure, they effectively suffocated her. In December 1998, a report by a college of experts supported the coroner's findings showing that Sémira had been suffocated during the attempted deportation on September 22, 1998.

The Human Rights League is seeking to ascertain what responsibility the two former ministers, Johan Vande Lanotte and Louis Tobback, have for the particular method used in the deportation which contributed directly to Sémira's death.

One of the gendarmes involved in the expulsion of Sémira had already been suspended for a month in January 1998 for maltreating a Moroccan deportee. At the beginning of September this year, investigating magistrate Colette Calwaert finally gave her agreement that letters rogatory requesting the formal questioning of the repatriated Moroccan be issued. Calwaert has also agreed that the former Interior Minister Johan Vande Lanotte should give testimony regarding the “cushion” technique.

After a long period of sick leave, the three gendarmes involved in the deportation of Sémira were subjected to internal disciplinary measures for a brief time, and were

then moved to other posts. Their superior officer was transferred to the *École de gendarmerie* in Etterbeek, where he is an instructor.

A videotape made by the gendarmes during the expulsion of Sémira is said to contain images that are “unbearable”. The tape clearly shows the suffering that the young woman endured as the cushion was applied to her face by a gendarme, while Sémira's hands were restrained behind her back. Calwaert estimates that the case could be presented to the courts by next June or May, with a lawsuit opening shortly thereafter.

The public outrage that occurred following the death of Sémira forced the Interior Ministry to order a moratorium on forced deportations. However, this only lasted a few days. Although the “cushion” technique was prohibited, other methods of physical restraint, which are criticised for their violence, are still in use.

Ecolo (Green Party) deputy Vincent Decroly has written to the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture complaining that deportees regularly have their arms and legs bound with plastic restraints. A large stuffed glove is placed over the deportee's mouth and nose to prevent cries being heard, a method which Decroly insists involves the same dangers of smothering as the use of a cushion.

Decroly has also documented cases where strong sedatives have been administered to deportees, to ensure the gendarmes can load them onto the planes “calmly”. In one case, a 19-year-old woman from Burundi being deported to Uganda arrived at Kampala semiconscious. She says she was injected with a sedative. The African Centre for the Treatment of the Victims of Torture, who examined her, confirmed that her body bore signs of spots that are a common reaction to the injection of such drugs.



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