

Amnesty International reports widespread human rights abuses in Europe

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In March, Amnesty International (AI) released its "Concerns in Europe" bulletin. This documents AI's most pressing concerns about human rights abuses occurring in Europe between July and December 1999.

It is only possible to highlight key aspects of the report, which contains details of ill treatment, discrimination, political repression and police killings in virtually every European country. Particularly significant are the reports on three countries crucial to the foreign policy objectives of the European Union (EU)—Russia, Turkey and the territories of the former Yugoslavia.

The EU governments have hailed Russia's new President Vladimir Putin as a leader who will help integrate the country more fully into the West. The AI report highlights the issue with which Putin is most identified, the prosecution of Russia's brutal war against Chechnya. It accuses the Russian authorities of violating international humanitarian law within Chechnya itself and of arbitrarily detaining, ill-treating and torturing Chechens who reside in the Russian capital, Moscow. AI describe accounts of Russian forces attacking civilians—including hospitals, medical personnel and Red Cross vehicles—causing high civilian casualties. It notes one attack on October 21 when a series of explosions in central Grozny destroyed a mosque and the city's only working maternity hospital. At least 137 civilians were reported dead and 400 wounded. The dead included 13 mothers and 13 newborn babies at the hospital.

In Moscow, police and the authorities used residence permit checks—supposedly abolished in 1991—to persecute minorities, particularly Chechens. Police rounded up some 20,000 non-Muscovites in September alone and expelled 10,000 from the city.

America and Europe have sought to cultivate relations with Turkey as a strategic political and geographical ally. Turkey's application for EU membership is currently under favourable consideration. Yet easily the most horrendous accounts of torture and ill treatment in AI's bulletin concern Turkey. AI note that its review in the second half of 1999 "focused on the problems of widespread torture, the risk of a resumption of executions after a 15-year de facto moratorium, restrictions on freedom of expression and continuing pressure on human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience".

The bulletin highlights the kidnap and kangaroo court trial of Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), in June last year. The Court of Appeal has upheld Ocalan's death sentence, although due to pressure by the EU it has not yet been implemented.

Turkish security forces also abducted Cevat Soysal, another leading PKK member, from Moldova on July 13. Soysal says he was tortured during his detention. "He described methods of torture including electro-shock torture, being suspended by the arms, being forced to lie naked on ice, being sprayed with pressurised water and not being allowed to sleep. He also reported being badly beaten and forced to swallow a drug, which made him tearful and subject to mood swings, weakened his resolve and forced him to relax."

Mass detentions were carried out across the country of suspected PKK members, as well as representatives of the legal pro-Kurdish party HADEP. One HADEP member reported that "he was beaten in detention, his testicles were squeezed with a rope, he was given electric shocks, suspended by the arms, forced to lie on ice, hosed with cold water at high pressure and subjected to sexual assaults."

Repression is directed against all opponents of the Turkish government. On September 26, 10 prisoners from left-wing organisations, including two members of the Central Committee of the Turkish Communist Party, were killed in Ankara Central Closed Prison and dozens wounded by security forces. Human rights defenders in Istanbul protesting the 10 deaths were badly beaten, threatened and verbally abused by police and detained.

AI's bulletin deals with the period immediately following the end of NATO's bombardment of Serbia and the entry of NATO troops in Kosovo. It notes that since then, "a new tragedy emerged as thousands of Serbs and Roma fled into Serbia or took refuge in small areas of Kosovo which were soon to become Serb-controlled enclaves." It states that "regrettably, their fears [of attack] were justified as murders, violent attacks, abductions, rapes and house burning directed against non-Albanians or Albanians accused of 'collaboration' become characteristic of the new situation". Within six months of their entry into the province, KFOR troops had recorded 414 murders, 264 of which were of non-Albanians. "Non-Albanians would have made up some five per cent of the population or thereabouts; the statistics thus make it clear that minorities had been deliberately targeted".

Serbian authorities have reportedly transferred up to 2,000 ethnic Albanians detained for political crimes to Serbian jails. AI note that their information "indicated that the detainees had been subject to the same brutal torture or ill-treatment which had been meted out to Kosovo Albanian detainees in pre-trial detention for years previously". It also draws attention to an AI document, published in November 1999—*A Broken Circle: Disappeared and abducted in Kosovo*—which highlighted the number of abductions of ethnic Albanians and of Serbs that had taken place over the last three years.

The situation is no better in the other countries that made up the former Yugoslavia. In Croatia, the authorities continue to put up barriers to the return and reintegration of Croatian Serb refugees expelled or forced out during the Bosnian war. Ethnically motivated violence has meant scores of Croatian Serbs seeking asylum elsewhere in Europe. The Croatian authorities continue to deny citizenship to many Croatian Serb refugees. In Bosnia-Herzegovina as well, AI report continued attacks on those attempting to return to their pre-war homes. In November, the High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina, Wolfgang Petrisch, dismissed 22 local officials throughout the country who had been obstructing refugee returns. In July, the homes of 15 Serbs in Zajaruga village were destroyed, whilst in Gacko, in September, mortars were fired at the homes of recently returned Bosnians.

Within Western Europe, AI's report is largely taken up with acts of repression conducted against the most vulnerable members of society—immigrants, asylum-seekers and children. A common theme is the abuse meted out against racial minorities, and particularly asylum-seekers, as each EU country seeks to consolidate "Fortress Europe". In most instances this abuse is perpetrated by the state—the police, judiciary and prison system.

Austria, recently the butt of international protests against the incorporation of neo-Nazi Jorg Haider's Freedom Party into the government, has been repeatedly reported to various international bodies for the use of torture, particularly against immigrants. One case highlighted by AI is that of Nigerian national Raymond Ayodeji, who was out walking in the early afternoon of July 3 with his Austrian wife and three children. In the brief time that Ayodeji became separated from his family, he was approached by three police officers for identification papers. Mrs. Ayodeji reports that when she returned she found her husband lying on the floor, being beaten by the police. Ayodeji states that he had objected to racial insults from the police officers, who retaliated by beating him. One of the officers called for reinforcements. A further three officers then joined the attack before taking Ayodeji to the police station. Ayodeji was given a conditional eight-month prison sentence for supposedly assaulting the police.

AI complained to the Austrian authorities about the deaths of asylum-seekers during deportation. Marcus Omofuma, a 25-year-old Nigerian citizen, died during his deportation from Vienna to Nigeria on May 1. Omofuma allegedly suffocated on the aeroplane in the presence of three police officers, after being bound and gagged. AI report that there is "a considerable degree of ambiguity regarding the types of physical restraints" that can be employed during deportation.

Such practices are common in Europe. AI note that in Belgium Nigerian national Semira Adamu died by asphyxiation during an attempted deportation from Brussels national airport in September 1998. Belgium police use the "cushion technique" during deportations in which they are allowed to press a cushion against the mouth of a reluctant deportee to prevent them shouting. An investigation in Semira's death was still continuing during the period of review. AI point out that allegations have been made that police officers involved in deportations had been using heavily padded gloves to cover the mouth of deportees, thus blocking their airways. There were also reports of officers "hog-tying" deportees, placing them on the floor with their hands and ankles tied together behind their bodies. Keeping anyone in this position is known to be highly dangerous, and has caused death.

AI also note that the Belgian authorities had to conduct an internal investigation into violent assaults on asylum-seekers at the Steenokkerzeel Detention Centre in October 1998. Detainees allege they were subject to repeated physical assaults during the incident. There have been other allegations of ill treatment made by detainees at several other detention centres in Belgium.

In Germany, asylum-seekers complained of ill treatment by officers from the Federal Border Police (BGS) at Dusseldorf airport in March 1999 during the deportation of 15 Guinea nationals. They were reportedly accompanied by 41 BGS officers, strip-searched and, after redressing, had their hands bound behind their backs and their legs tied together. On board the plane the deportees allege they were beaten with truncheons on the legs, backs and heads and punched in the face and chest.

Switzerland is also accused of ill-treating deportees. At the end of October 1999, it was reported that 6,440 rejected asylum-seekers had been deported from Zurich-Kloten airport that year. In some instances, deportees reported adhesive tape being placed across their mouths—restricting their breathing—and a helmet, similar to a motorcycle helmet, being placed over their heads "whilst more adhesive tape was wrapped over and around the helmet, forcing closed their jaws". In March,

Palestinian Khaled Abu Zarifeh died at the airport during a deportation operation after adhesive tape was wrapped around his mouth and he was strapped into a wheelchair.

Attacks on Roma, or gypsies, are frequently reported in the bulletin. In Bulgaria, AI list at least four separate incidents in which Roma travellers were shot at by police, causing serious injuries, or were detained and beaten in police cells. In the Czech Republic, AI record numerous instances of violent assaults against Roma, particularly by skinheads and right-wing extremists. There are 250,000 to 300,000 Roma in the Czech Republic and the government's own report on racist and extremist crime for 1998 recorded that the number of followers of extremist movements had doubled in one year alone, to almost 10,000. The number of skinheads also rose by 40 percent in the same period.

Roma people regularly complain that the authorities and police collude with the skinheads and fascists. AI note that on October 13 the town council of Usti nad Labem constructed a wall around Roma tenants in Maticni Street, after other residents had complained about them. Some 80 police officers were used to confine the Roma to their apartments whilst the wall was built. Following intervention by the UN, the wall was demolished on November 24.

In Hungary, on September 5, 30 police officers surrounded a Budapest apartment block chanting, "Come out you dirty gypsies" after receiving a false call that Roma children had attacked a pregnant woman. Police officers entered one apartment, beating and arresting young Roma boys and girls. Six were then taken to the police station, where officers continued to beat three young men. The three young women were verbally abused and threatened with a beating.

In Slovakia, AI record "a pattern of reported instances of police officers carrying out punitive operations targeted against entire Romani communities." These most usually involve dawn raids on apartments by masked police officers using dogs, forced entrance, police using racial abuse and "ill-treatment or torture of members of the Romani community by the police officers". At one apartment building on December 2, up to 100 police officers had forced hundreds of people to vacate the building. Police also allegedly fired rubber bullets at residents, wounding one 14-year-old boy in the leg.

On July 28, the European Court of Human Rights found France guilty of violating international norms concerning torture and the right to fair trial. The charge arose from the case of Ahmed Selmouni, who has dual Moroccan and Netherlands citizenship, and had been arrested for a drugs offence in November 1991 and was held in police custody for three days. Five police officers were convicted of committing violent acts against Selmouni and another detainee, Amdelmajid Madi. These included repeated punchings, kickings, beatings with a baseball bat and truncheon, being urinated on and threatened with a syringe and blowtorch.

France was also found guilty of violating the European Convention on Human Rights on November 9, in regard to length of preventative detention. This arose from the case of Ismael Debboub, arrested during a sweeping police operation in November 1994, directed against alleged supporters or members of Algerian armed opposition groups. Debboub was held in preventive detention for a total of four years, two months and 10 days before being sentenced to six years imprisonment.

A substantial section of the AI's review on the UK focuses on its record of human rights abuses in Northern Ireland, noting that much of this is currently subject to investigation under the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement. Its section on internal repression highlights a feature that receives little attention within Britain—the ill treatment of children. According to AI, there are reports of neck-holds being used on teenagers in Medway Secure Training Centre. "In November, the Howard League for Penal Reform urged a full-scale criminal investigation into allegations that prison officers had assaulted and verbally abused prisoners as young as 15 in HMP Portland in Dorset". In Northern Ireland it is alleged that

children held in Lisnevin Juvenile Justice Centre were kept in an isolation unit for up to seven days at a time as punishment. The bulletin notes that the European Court of Human Rights ruled in December that the UK had denied a fair trial to Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, the children convicted in an adult court of murder for the killing of two-year-old Jamie Bulger in 1993.



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