

African man dies at the hands of German police

Sokal Lena
28 December 2001

At the beginning of December, an otherwise healthy young man from Cameroon died shortly after the legal authorities forced him to take an emetic. 19-year-old Achimedes J. was arrested by police in Hamburg on suspicion of possessing illegal drugs. After having been forcibly administered an emetic to reveal the contents of his stomach, the young man immediately fell into a coma and died shortly afterwards.

The prosecuting attorney ordered the use of an emetic only a few minutes after his arrest. In the Institute of Legal Medicine, which is part of the University Hospital of Eppendorf, the young man panicked and struggled as he was forced to take the emetic. As he fell to the floor he was heard to cry, "I will die, I will die!"

Despite his protests, the attending doctor refrained from examining Achimedes' state of health, instead calling for more policemen to bring him under control. (The head of the Institute of Legal Medicine, professor Klaus Püschel later cynically declared that the doctor had not conducted an examination because of the resistance put up by Achimedes.) In the end, the young man was held down by his head, stomach and legs, and only at the third attempt did the doctor managed to insert a tube through his nose. He was then given the usual dose (30ml) of the emetic Ipecacuanha syrup together with 800 ml of water.

After being administered the drug, his face immediately changed colour, he fell to the ground where he remained motionless. In a disconcerting statement for a doctor, professor Püschel later explained to the press: "The risks seem to have been underestimated... Colleagues observed him for two to three minutes. Sometimes people pretend that they are dead. We give them time to recover."

The forced use of the emetics had caused a cardiac arrest. Although he was in a hospital, Achimedes

received no immediate medical assistance, and reanimation attempts only began after vital minutes had already been lost.

Ronald Schill, the new interior minister in the city-state legislature, called the incident "regrettable", but insisted that emetics would continue to be used in the future, even if they can severely damage a person's health or even cause death: "A change in this law would be a signal that the prosecution of criminals in Hamburg was not being conducted with the necessary rigorousness."

The forced use of emetics is controversial for both medical and legal reasons. In Hamburg, the measure was introduced in the summer of 2001 as a means of securing evidence. The run-up to the local elections in Hamburg in September were dominated by a law-and-order campaign by both the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the newly formed rightwing *Partei Rechtstaatlicher Offensive* (PRO, Constitutional Offensive Party) headed by Schill. The then governing Social Democratic-Green Party coalition in the Hamburg tried to trump the CDU and PRO by launching their own campaign against small-time drug dealers and users. Only a few weeks before the election, the state legislature agreed the forced use of emetics for suspected drug dealers, as well as the increased use of video surveillance in public places and the prosecution of drug addicts.

The attempts by the SPD-Green coalition in Hamburg to present itself as being tough on law-and-order not only created the ideal conditions for the rightwing to win the elections, but the repressive decrees passed by the previous SPD-Green administration are being enthusiastically taken up and intensified by the new rightwing coalition government of the CDU, Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the PRO.

Following this latest death, the chairman of the Green faction in Hamburg, Krista Seger, called for an immediate halt to the forced use of emetics, saying, “The potential risks of giving people emetics using a stomach tube... must be re-examined”. In reality it has been known for a long time that emetics can cause breathing difficulties, bleeding of the mucous membrane and the prolonged vomiting of blood, and in some cases has resulted in death.

In a 1991 report, professor Püschel had expressly warned against using emetics, only changing his opinion this summer to coincide with the change of political direction of the SPD. In the meantime, Püschel has come under pressure from within the medical profession. A group of Hamburg doctors is preparing to launch legal proceedings against him. The president of the local doctors’ association, Frank Ulrich Montgomery, stated, “The Senate [Hamburg state legislature] must put an end to killing people by using force.”

In summer 2001, Hamburg’s SPD-Green government declared that the medical appraisal of using emetics had changed. The introduction of the forced use of emetics for suspected drug dealers was justified by the claim that a “Mexican syrup” now existed that doctors regarded as completely harmless. The then deputy mayor Krista Seger (Green Party) declared that introducing the forced use of emetics was a “symbolic policy. The coalition wanted to defuse an issue during the election campaign.”

Following the example of the city of Bremen, the new administration in Hamburg has now stipulated that emetics are to be “used consistently”. As Interior Minister, Schill proposed in November that emetics should be used in prison, where suspects are awaiting trial, instead of in the University Hospital. In early December, he also declared that the conditions governing the use of emetics for suspected drug dealers should be relaxed. In the course of one weekend in Hamburg, police employed emetics on a total of nine occasions. By comparison, in Frankfurt, emetics were used just ten times during the entire year 2000.

The fact that the Hamburg Senate cites the example of Bremen in its campaign against small-time dealers illustrates its willingness to act ruthlessly and to terrorise even innocent people in the so-called “war on drugs”. For example, Bremen police had forced a

37-year-old Ghanaian father to take an emetic because officers had seen him “swallowing something” near the central railway station. The arrested man vomited up blood, not drugs, and suffered diarrhoea and sickness for a week following this incident. The case he sought to bring against the police was dropped on the grounds of the “minor nature” of the offence. The police rejected the accusation that the victim’s skin colour had anything to do with his arrest on suspicion of drug dealing or his treatment thereafter.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact