

Protests in Clermont-Ferrand, France over man's death after beating by police

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12 January 2012

Wissam el-Yamni died on Monday as a result of his brutal arrest by the police on the night of New Year's Eve, in the La Gauthière neighbourhood in the industrial town of Clermont-Ferrand in central France. When he arrived at the hospital, the 30-year-old was in a coma from cardiac arrest and presented fractures and lesions on his neck.

A demonstration of 600 to 700 people marched Tuesday in La Gauthière, behind banners reading "For Wissam, respect and justice" or "Rest in peace" One banner addressed Interior Minister Claude Guéant: "Guéant, admit that the police killed someone."

El-Yamni's arrest and subsequent hospitalization in critical condition provoked immediate anger

and dismay in the neighbourhood and throughout the city. According to Jean-Louis Borie, lawyer for the League of Human Rights (LDH) in Clermont-Ferrand, youth living in the difficult neighbourhoods "are frequently hassled by repeated ID checks based on skin colour," and "relations between the police and the youth are unhealthy."

Le Parisien reported that since el-Yamni's arrest, "the tension in Clermont-Ferrand has been palpable, with dozens of cars torched over the weekend and a silent march of over 500 people on Sunday. The marchers, mainly youth from the town's working class neighbourhoods, gathered in front of the police station behind a banner saying: 'Nobody is above the law, stop police brutality, we're all with you Wissam.'"

The police claim that el-Yamni was "under the influence of alcohol, cannabis and cocaine," and that when he was arrested he had been "very wound up." He had been arrested after a chase, pushed to the ground, and handcuffed after allegedly attacking the police and throwing objects at their vehicle. The police also claimed that they had been answering a call for

help made on el-Yamni's phone with the aim of drawing them into an ambush.

After news broke of el-Yamni's death on Monday afternoon, at around 9 pm a helicopter with a searchlight began to fly over La Gauthière. Half an hour later, four riot police coaches took position in the roads adjacent to the neighbourhood.

Laure Marchand, who lives in the neighbourhood, told the press on Monday evening: "At the supermarket towards the evening the youth said 'he's dead'. They are all angry." She said she had witnessed the police violence against the young man on New Year's Eve night from her window. She stated that "two people pinned him to the ground and hit his body and his head."

The judicial enquiry into the behaviour of the two officers who had arrested el-Yamni is being made on charges of "intentional violence by a person entrusted with public authority, unintentionally causing death."

Police authorities announced on Monday that the security forces, which had been reinforced over the weekend, would be maintained, with 420 police and gendarmes already deployed in Clermont-Ferrand the night before. Two helicopters were to be used, one equipped with a thermal camera and the other with a searchlight. Reinforcements could be brought in if needed.

Mr Borie commented on Tuesday: "The regional police authority [*préfet*] has placed the area on a war footing, notably with a helicopter which has swept the town with its searchlight all night."

The night of Monday-Tuesday saw fewer disturbances than the previous nights, with 5 cars torched and 17 arrests. Nevertheless the police authority stressed that police officers had been attacked by "very small isolated groups," and that this justified

the “maintenance of a substantial force” the next night.

Summary justice was meted out by the courts on Monday afternoon. Three young people of between 18 and 20 appeared in court on Monday, charged with throwing stones on New Year's Eve night, which all three denied. One received a 4-month prison sentence, another a one-year sentence. The other was released.

Aware of deep social discontent in France over austerity measures, particularly in the urban ghettos which house 17 percent of the French population, and mindful of the youth revolts last year in Britain and in 2005 in France, authorities wish to avoid the spread of protests at all costs.

The regional LDH warned that if the two policemen under investigation for the arrest were “suspended”, this would restore calm to the neighbourhoods. Borie, speaking for the LDH, said: “The youth could get the impression that there are double standards”, with on the one hand, people getting summary judgement and, on the other, policemen still at work.

Interior Minister Claude Guéant has said that the two policemen involved are not working but have not been suspended.

On Tuesday night another young man aged 25, with a heart condition, died of a heart attack as he was being arrested in a police drug sting operation in the Paris suburb of Aulnay-sous-Bois.



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