

Police attack peaceful anti-racist protesters in Germany

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Police intervened violently last Saturday to break up a demonstration in the east German city of Dessau. More than 200 people had gathered to commemorate Oury Jalloh, an asylum seeker from Sierra Leone who burned to death in a Dessau police cell seven years ago. Thirty demonstrators were injured, some seriously, including Mouctar Bah, the founder of the “Initiative in Memory of Oury Jalloh,” who had officially organised the protest march. The protesters were demanding an explanation of the circumstances of Oury’s death.

Large numbers of police in full riot gear surrounded the 240 protesters at the start of their protest march. The police objected to a poster with the slogan “Oury Jalloh—it was murder” and sought to confiscate banners and poster for alleged “defamation”. A woman who painted the slogan on the asphalt with chalk was beaten.

Afterwards, the police repeatedly tried to stop the demonstration, but the demonstrators refused to respond to the provocations of the police and continued their peaceful protest march to the Dessau police station.

After the demonstration, protesters proceeded to the city’s main train station, where they met a police cordon. The police then threatened and attacked the long-time African activists of the Oury Jalloh Initiative. The police beat Mouctar Bah unconscious, severely injured two other board members of the Initiative with blows to the head, and sprayed pepper spray directly into the eyes of other protesters.

Several people were taken into custody, and the police have initiated 23 investigations relating to breach of the peace, assault, libel, and resisting law enforcement officers. In fact, it was the police who reacted with extreme violence against a peaceful demonstration.

In other years, memorial meetings and protest events under similar slogans have been tolerated and were not subject to harassment. But this time, police turned up at Mouctar Bah’s doorstep, just a few days before the demonstration, and told him that posters attacking the police would not be tolerated. Should their advice be ignored, the police warned, Bah would face a lawsuit.

One day before the demonstration, the organisers of the demonstration, the League for Human Rights, expressed its surprise to the Police Department that a protest that had been tolerated for years was now to be criminalised. They also pointed out the police were evidently trying to create in advance a pretext to intervene against the demonstration, in violation of basic democratic rights.

The Initiative in Memory of Oury Jalloh has since appealed to the local authority in Dessau, which authorised the demonstration. They referred to a ruling by the Supreme Administrative Court of Saxony-Anhalt, which on March 31, 2006, declared that it was illegal to ban oral or written statements claiming that Oury Jalloh had been the subject of murder or manslaughter.

The authority responded by declaring that it could not take action against the police, when the latter sought to interpret certain forms of behaviour as a criminal offence.

It was also announced that half a year ago, the local police had told the Initiative in Memory of Oury Jalloh “not to cross any lines”.

In a press release, the police union complained that police were accused of racist practices in Saxony-Anhalt. The release states: “These untenable accusations are unacceptable. A line has to be drawn against all those who accuse officials of holding such negative ideologies. We will clearly communicate our

outrage regarding these comments to the Initiative in Memory of Oury Jalloh. “

The police seem to have taken Saturday’s demonstration as an opportunity to turn their threat into action. Three leading representatives of the Initiative were most severely hurt by the police beatings.

There are good reasons for suspecting that Oury Jalloh’s death was racially motivated. He was taken into police custody on January 7, 2005, to establish his identity, although he had previously shown his papers and had not been accused of any offence. At the police station, he was apparently beaten, suffering a broken nose and a ruptured eardrum. He was then tied down to a bed in a cell and burned to death under circumstances that were never properly clarified.

The founder and chairman of the Initiative in Memory of Oury Jalloh, Mouctar Bah, has been repeatedly harassed by the police and charged with unsubstantiated criminal offences. African activists of the initiative have also been repeatedly targeted by the local police, which has a long record of degrading abuse of asylum seekers in Dessau.

The latest appeal proceedings conducted by the District Court of Magdeburg are now drawing to a close, but once again, this trial was unable to shed any real new light on Oury’s death.

Despite numerous inconsistencies and contradictory testimony, the court accepted the hypothesis that Oury Jalloh was responsible for his own death by burning, despite the fact that his hands were bound to a bed that had a fire-resistant mattress.

Fire experts have been unable to explain how such a self-inflicted death is at all possible. They have repeatedly been ordered to explain the fire based on the hypothesis that Oury Jalloh burned himself to death; however, in court, these experts had to admit that there was no way to explain the condition of the corpse based on such a thesis.

Important evidence—schedules, custody records and video recordings—have been destroyed by police. Evidence pointing to the use of ignitable materials was rendered useless due to the alleged sloppy procedures adopted by the police.

The sudden appearance of a cigarette lighter, long after the crime scene had been inspected, was not pursued, and new witness statements that the police

officers Hans-Ulrich M. and Udo S. had re-entered the cell of Oury Jalloh half an hour before the fire broke out were not followed up. The indictment against the two was dropped completely.

The only person in the dock was the police chief, Andrew S., who is accused of manslaughter because he had turned off the fire alarms in the police station and thereby prevented any assistance to Oury Jalloh as he burned to death.



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