Video shows Virginia police murder of man during hospital admission

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Video released Tuesday shows how Irvo Otieno, a 28-year-old Kenyan émigré, was murdered by police and hospital employees in Henrico County, Virginia, after suffering a mental health crisis on March 6.

In what the family's attorney compared to the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, Otieno was forced to the floor and held down by as many as 10 people, one "with a knee on his neck." Seven police officers, four of whom weighed over 250 pounds, and three hospital staff piled on top of Otieno for 12 minutes until he was no longer breathing. A preliminary autopsy report cites asphyxiation as the cause of death.

The seven Henrico County Sheriff's deputies were indicted by a grand jury on March 14 and arrested on one charge each of second-degree murder. The deputies who now face trial are Randy Joseph Boyer, 57; Dwayne Alan Bramble, 37; Jermaine Lavar Branch, 45; Bradley Thomas Disse, 43; Tabitha Renee Levere, 50; Brandon Edwards Rodgers, 48; and Kaivell Dajour Sanders, 30.

The three hospital employees arrested on March 16 are Sadarius Devon Williams, 27; Wavie Lavon Jones, 34; and Darian Malique Blackwell, 23. Each faces a charge of second-degree murder.

Otieno was a musician who hoped one day to start his own recording label. His mother, Caroline Ouko, spoke to CNN about her son: "He was brilliant and creative and bright." The family moved to the United States from Kenya when Otieno was four years old. Ouko noted, "This is what he knows. This is home for him. And when you're home you are in a community. We live in a community. We have friends. This young man you see here had a big heart."

The events leading up to Otieno's death at the hands of police and medical staff began on March 2 when a neighbor called police to report the 28-year-old was behaving oddly. Police classified the situation as a mental health problem. According to his mother, Otieno was being treated for mental illness for which he took medication and for which he occasionally sought medical attention.

The next morning, March 3, another neighbor called police to report a suspected burglary when Otieno was found collecting the lights from their lawn. Based on police observations and the family's intervention, Otieno was placed under an emergency custody order (ECO) in which a person who is believed to be a danger to themselves or others as a result of mental illness can be hospitalized.

Despite requests from Otieno's mother to have her son brought to a hospital closer to their home, the police took him to Henrico Doctors' Hospital where he became agitated and lashed out at police and hospital staff. At this point, Henrico County police arrested Otieno for vandalism, disorderly conduct and assaulting an officer. He was taken to Henrico County Jail West where he was denied his medication and medical treatment for three days.

Video from the jail shows Otieno lying naked on the floor among feces. Police "force rushed" him while he was in leg irons, shoving him against the metal bed and wall of his cell. The video also shows police punching Otieno in the ribs and pepper spraying him.

Finally on March 6, Otieno was transferred to Central State Hospital in Dinwiddie County where he died during intake. The reasons for his transfer are unclear, but the police claimed Otieno became violent at the hospital.

The video released to the public on March 21 shows a shackled and handcuffed Otieno being hustled into an admissions area of the hospital by deputies. He appears to resist efforts to be seated and finally slides to the

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floor against a small sofa where he sat without incident with two police officers standing next to him with their hands on his shoulders. Up to 16 police and hospital personnel, sometimes two and three deep, encircled Otieno as one hospital employee appears to be filling out paperwork.

About six minutes into the video, Otieno appears to stir, a third cop kneels on his shackled legs. A minute later, a fourth cop kneels and restrains his feet. Almost nine minutes into the video, Otieno slides into a prone position on the floor at which point more deputies and hospital staff pile onto him. One police officer lies down on Otieno's torso with his hands and arms toward his head.

At 12 minutes, it becomes apparent that Otieno has been on his stomach since sliding from a seated position. The hospital staff step away and the deputies roll his lifeless body to face up. It is unclear in the excerpt whether or not the officers attempted to resuscitate Otieno as has been reported by some news outlets.

Neither the police nor hospital staff called 911 but waited three hours to report Otieno's death to Virginia State Police, according to Virginia prosecutor Ann Cabell Baskervill. She also revealed that Otieno's body was moved, the restraints were removed, he was washed, and a funeral home was called instead of the medical examiner's office.

According to the Washington Post's Fatal Police Shootings Database, people suffering a mental health crisis comprise over 20 percent of fatal shootings by police while the Treatment Advocacy Center documented that people with untreated mental illness are sixteen times more likely to be killed in a confrontation with police. The Mapping Police Violence database documented that out of the record number of 1,194 people killed by police last year, 110 had been reported to police as behaving erratically or having a mental health crisis.

Decades of funding cuts to public health programs, in particular those providing mental health services, have turned mental illness into a police matter. According to the federal Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 50 percent of all inmates in jails and a third of prison inmates have been diagnosed with mental illness. The number of inmates who reported mental health concerns were markedly higher.

There is scant evidence that so-called harm reduction and deflection programs such as the Law Enforcement Assistance Diversion (LEAD) project launched in 2011 in Seattle, Washington, has had any effect on reducing police killings. In fact, the steady rise of police shootings year on year since the *Washington Post* started its database in 2015 is proof that such reforms are purely superficial.

The working class must abolish capitalism to end police violence. Irvo Otieno's brutal and prolonged death at the hands of police is the result of the barbarous capitalist system which must impose ever more violent controls on the working class in order for the ruling elite to maintain its grip on power.

The working class is rising up against homicidal indifference of the ruling elite to their lives and health as evidenced by mass protests and strikes in France, Greece, and Sri Lanka. These movements must build organizations of struggle which will transfer power from the capitalists to a workers state built on the scientific principles of Marxism.

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