

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Police Chief Boasts of 785 Killings in 90 Days

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Nigeria's government should launch an independent public inquiry in light of official statistics indicating that police have shot and killed more than 8,000 Nigerians since 2000, Human Rights Watch said today. The figures show 785 killed in just three months this year, while the true number of people killed by the police since 2000 may exceed 10,000.

On November 14, 2007, Inspector General of Police Mike Okiro announced that 785 suspected armed robbers were shot and killed in gunfire exchanges with the police between June and the beginning of September 2007. According to the same set of statistics, 1,628 armed robbers were arrested during the same period. Police personnel also killed one person for every two firearms they managed to recover.

It's stunning that the police killed half as many armed robbery suspects as they managed to arrest during Okiro's first 90 days, said Peter Takirambudde, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. And it's scandalous that leading police officials seem to regard the routine killing of Nigerian citizens' criminal suspects or not as a point of pride.

The figures suggest that police have routinely resorted to disproportionate and illegal use of lethal force and may have committed multiple extrajudicial killings in the course of police operations. Such indications are especially worrying in light of numerous well-documented cases of deaths of detainees in police custody. Almost as disturbing as the numbers themselves is that leading police officials appear to regard these grim statistics as an indication of effective police work rather than as a scandal. Okiro announced the statistics to the House of Representatives Police Affairs Committee in a speech chronicling the achievements of his first three months in office.

Nigeria's police force remains mired in deeply entrenched patterns of torture, corruption, murder, and other forms of human rights abuse. Torture remains a routine part of police interrogation and police officers have carried out numerous extrajudicial killings of suspects in their custody. A 2005 [report](#) by Human Rights Watch documented systemic patterns of torture and extrajudicial killings in the police force, and in March 2007 the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture found that torture remained an intrinsic part of how law enforcement services operate in Nigeria.

Many parts of Nigeria experience extremely high levels of violent crime, owing partly to rising poverty, high unemployment and the proliferation of small arms throughout the country. Dozens of Nigerian police officers die in the line of duty every year.

Nigeria's police generally lack capacity to deal with the challenges they face. Police officers are poorly trained, ill-equipped, and poorly remunerated. Some human rights abuses carried out by the police are partly a response to public pressure to reduce the high levels of violent crime. Nigerian civil society groups and Human Rights Watch's own investigations have revealed that, lacking the means to carry out effective criminal investigations, some police officers extract confessions through torture, or murder suspects in their custody who police believe to be guilty. Other cases represent a simple abuse of power targeting ordinary civilians.

Police officers routinely label individuals they kill as armed robbers who fired on police; according to police statistics, all of the thousands of individuals shot and killed by police officers were armed robbers. Credible government investigations into allegations of disproportionate use of force or murder have been extremely rare and the facts on the ground often belie the claims of police officials. In June 2005, the murder of six young people at a police checkpoint in Abuja generated a nationwide scandal that led to an investigation and criminal charges against the officers involved, but that case was an exception to prevailing norms. Reported cases of investigations into police killings have been extremely rare and accountability even less common.

In August 2006, police arrested and publicly paraded 12 armed robbery suspects in the Abia State town of Umuahia; the 12 were later found among a pile of 16 corpses deposited near a local mortuary. Police officials claimed that all 16 were armed robbers who had somehow been involved in an exchange of gunfire with the police. No investigation was carried out.

According to the police's own statistics, police personnel have shot and killed more than 8,000 people since January 2000 in circumstances that remain largely unexplained. In 2005, police officials told Human Rights Watch that from January 2000 to March 2004 police personnel killed 7,198 armed robbers in combat. Remarkably, during the first three months of 2004, the police claimed to have killed 422 armed robbers in shootouts, while recovering only 300 firearms.

The figures available to Human Rights Watch do not include any data for police killings during most of 2004, 2005, 2006, or the first half of 2007. If police killings were carried out at even half the average rate during that period, Nigeria's police have killed in excess of 10,000 people.

Nigeria is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and as such has an obligation to carry out an effective official investigation when individuals have been killed as a result of the use of force by any law enforcement official. International standards also require that, when resort to firearms and use of force is unavoidable, the police exercise restraint and act in proportion to the seriousness of the offense, so as to respect and preserve human life. Governments are required to ensure that arbitrary or abusive use of force and firearms by police is appropriately punished.

Nigerian president Umaru Yar'Adua came into office in May 2007 after being named the victor in [elections](#), the credibility of which was destroyed by rampant fraud and violence. Nonetheless, President Yar'Adua has pledged to uphold the rule of law and press for key reforms. Yar'Adua named Mike Okiro as Acting Inspector General of Police in June 2007 and has not yet commented on the hundreds of killings the police claim to have since carried out.

Yar'Adua's pledge to respect the rule of law means little if the concept does not even require the police to account for the hundreds of Nigerians they kill in a routine month's work, Takirambudde said. The federal government should immediately launch a public and comprehensive inquiry into every killing carried out by the police since Okiro came into office as Inspector General.

Human Rights Watch called upon the federal government to end the rampant impunity that makes police abuses possible and commonplace. In addition to an immediate public investigation of police activity since Okiro came to office, resources must be devoted to improved police training, including training on human rights issues as well as legal and appropriate interrogation techniques.

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