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Nigeria: Obasanjo Confirms Torture, Killing by Police

Statement Must be Followed by Action

(London, August 22, 2005) – An unprecedented statement by Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo that Nigerian police officers have committed killings and torture must be followed up by concrete action, Human Rights Watch said today. In July 2005 Human Rights Watch published [a report](#) documenting widespread and routine police torture and deaths in custody.

“Obasanjo’s recognition of human rights abuses by the police is an important first step. However, addressing the problems of the police requires more than just lip service. It is essential that his words are followed by concrete steps to end police abuses.”

Peter Takirambudde, executive director of the Africa Division at Human Rights Watch

During a two-day workshop on policing and human rights in Abuja last week, President Obasanjo backed concrete steps to end police abuses. During his address Obasanjo affirmed that serious abuses, such as torture and extrajudicial killings, had occurred and said, “Nigeria is a signatory to the international charter on human rights and since these rights are entrenched

in our constitution, we are honor bound to make sure that no acts that might have negative implications for civil liberties in the country are condoned.”

The workshop was convened by the government in response to mounting criticism of police conduct. The police were implicated in the killing of six Igbo traders in Abuja in June.

“Obasanjo’s recognition of human rights abuses by the police is an important first step,” said Peter Takirambudde, executive director of the Africa Division at Human Rights Watch. “However addressing the problems of the police requires more than just lip service. It is essential that his words are followed by concrete steps to end police abuses.”

The Human Rights Watch report, “‘Rest in Pieces’: Police Torture and Deaths in Custody in Nigeria,” was based on interviews with more than fifty victims and witnesses. The first comprehensive study on torture by police, the report documented the brutal ill-treatment of ordinary criminal suspects, many of whom died as a result of their injuries. The abuses were perpetrated by senior and junior police officers to extract confessions and extort money from suspects.

In an official statement from the Minister of Information on July 27, the Nigerian government initially

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[“Rest in Pieces”: Police Torture and Deaths in Custody in Nigeria Report, July 27, 2005](#)

[Nigeria: Despite Reforms, Police Routinely Practice Torture Press Release, July 27, 2005](#)

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denied that police torture is routine and stated that all cases are investigated and prosecuted. However, Human Rights Watch's research shows that no officer who has committed torture has been held to account since Obasanjo came to power in 1999.

On numerous occasions, Human Rights Watch has asked the police for details of all officers being investigated and prosecuted for alleged human rights abuses. To date, this information has not been made available.

Bodies set up to investigate police abuses, such as the Police Service Commission and the National Human Rights Commission, lack political and financial support from the federal government. Crucially, they also lack the power to refer cases to the prosecutor, creating a serious accountability vacuum.

"President Obasanjo needs to show the world he is as serious about respecting human rights as he has said he is about addressing corruption," said Takirambudde. "If he wants to leave a legacy for Nigeria, for Africa, he should end the impunity which has for too long protected the perpetrators of abuse."

Human Rights Watch said that the Nigerian government must ensure that all cases of police abuse are independently investigated and the officers responsible face criminal prosecution. The Police Service Commission and the National Human Rights Commission must be strengthened and granted the power to refer cases to the prosecutor.

To improve accountability and transparency, all complaints against police officers must be compulsory reported and logged by the police. Details of how these cases are being followed up and the status of investigations must be made available to the public.

Human Rights Watch also urged the government to launch a nationwide public awareness campaign against police brutality to help change deeply engrained attitudes on the part of Nigerians that accept police violence.

The international community, which has been reluctant to criticize Nigeria's human rights record, can no longer turn a blind eye to police abuses. Donor governments, such as the U.K. and the U.S., should encourage police reform by conditioning further financial assistance, equipment and training to measurable improvements in police conduct and practice.

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