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State and Politics in Germany

“Racism is a violation of human rights” – An Interview with Selmin Çalışkan

Police violence, discrimination, the plight of refugees – human rights violations also happen in Germany, says Amnesty International. Selmin Çalışkan, secretary general of the German section of the organization, puts the situation into context.



Selmin Çalışkan; © Amnesty International Deutschland

Ms Çalışkan, in its 2013 Annual Report, Amnesty International criticizes the lack of an independent police complaints body in Germany to investigate instances of police violence. Why is such a body necessary?

For years, we have been receiving reports – that deserve to be taken seriously – of unlawful police violence in Germany. This is why we launched a transparency campaign in 2010. We are calling for independent commissions of enquiry to conduct full investigations into allegations against police officers.

It is of course a good thing that for example the police in Bavaria set up their own investigation unit to look into assaults by officers. Nonetheless, there is still a risk of bias when the police investigates its own officers. The European Court of Human Rights has emphasized on a number of occasions that any allegation of ill-treatment by police must be investigated by an impartial body. If a state fails to fulfil this obligation, it is in violation of human rights.



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What has the transparency campaign achieved so far?

Thanks to the Amnesty campaign, all police officers in two federal states – Berlin and Brandenburg – are now under legal obligation to wear identity badges, as we requested. When officers visibly wear their name or number on their uniform, criminal prosecution of any misconduct can be effectively carried out. Although a decision has already been taken to make this a requirement for major operations in the states of Rhineland-Palatinate, Lower Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, Baden-Württemberg and Bremen, it has yet to be implemented.

Furthermore, we demand that video surveillance be installed in police stations, as there are no independent witnesses to whatever happens to persons detained there. To sensitize officers, they also need to be given training in matters relating to human rights. This includes anti-discrimination training and the promotion of intercultural skills.



Amnesty International Campaign Video “More Responsibility in the Police Force”

“Investigating the ‘ethnic profiling’ phenomenon”

Is any specific pattern noticeable when it comes to police misconduct?

There is still a lack of comprehensive scientific knowledge on this subject. However, there is something along the lines of ‘ethnic profiling’, where people are subjected to police checks purely on the basis of their appearance, skin colour or a sense of their being different. In a judgement it made in 2012, the Rhineland-Palatinate Higher Administrative Court ruled that this constitutes discrimination. We have called upon the Conference of the Ministers of the Interior to commission a study to explore the phenomenon of ‘ethnic profiling’ in the German police force.

Amnesty International has announced that it will be placing a stronger focus on human rights violations in Germany than in the past. What will this concern?



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Besides assaults by police officers and racism in the police force, we have a third point of criticism: the way refugees are dealt with. One of our demands, for example, is that the system known as the ‘airport procedure’ be abolished. Refugees arriving by aeroplane are sent back without having undergone a proper asylum procedure. This affects even children and traumatized persons. Even when Germany sends asylum seekers back to EU countries, however, more thorough checks need to be carried out to determine whether this might prove problematic in individual cases.

Germany’s federal government must push far harder to ensure that fair asylum procedures are in place in all EU countries – otherwise increasing numbers of people will lose their lives in the Mediterranean sea. What is more, Germany has the capacity to accept many more refugees than it has in the past. In 2012, the UN Refugee Agency’s resettlement programme needed 170,000 places worldwide to accommodate refugees from crisis regions. Germany, however, is willing to accept merely 300 people per year – a willingness that so far applies only until 2014. Even the EU has taken only 5,000 people under the resettlement programme, while the USA has accommodated 50,000.

The NSU and controlling the arms trade

What other issues in Germany is Amnesty International keeping its eyes on?

Our next project is the implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty adopted in April 2013 by the UN General Assembly following 20 years of lobbying. The international treaty now needs to be transposed into German law and practice. There must be no more arms exported to countries where there is any risk of human rights violations. The federal government intends to inform the Bundestag (Germany’s parliament) only after export permits have been granted. We believe it should be informed beforehand! This will be a tough fight because vital economic and political interests are at stake.

We have observed how the “National Socialist Underground” (NSU) issue was dealt with: right from the start, investigations were pursued in the wrong direction. This has something to do with the way in which people within the authorities think. Some may have racial prejudices. Errors made during the investigations must be quickly uncovered. Racism is not an expression of opinion but in many cases a violation of human rights that must be punished.

How does Germany compare internationally on the question of human rights?

Amnesty does not compile any ranking of countries. Violations of human rights cannot be compared, they can only be eliminated. We look everywhere as closely as we can and attempt to do something to combat human rights violations in as many countries as possible.

The daughter of Turkish immigrants, Selmin Çalışkan was born in Düren in 1967 and is a fully-qualified Spanish and English translator. She worked for the women’s rights organization Medica Mondiale from 2003 to 2010, and later for the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). Before taking up the position of secretary general at Amnesty International Germany in March 2013, she worked for the European Network of Migrant Women in Brussels.

Dominik Reinle is a sociology graduate who works as a freelance journalist in Cologne, for the Internet editorial department of Westdeutscher Rundfunk, among others.

*Translation: Chris Cave
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*Any questions about this article? Please write to us!
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Related links

- Amnesty International Report 2013
- Amnesty Campaign: More Responsibility in the Police Force
- Amnesty International Germany YouTube channel
- UNHCR resettlement programme

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