

Amnesty International: Ferguson Police Crackdown Violated US and International Law

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The crackdown on peaceful protesters by police in Ferguson, Missouri violated numerous US and international laws, according to a report published Monday by Amnesty International.

The report, *The streets of America: Human rights abuses in Ferguson*, extensively documents systematic acts of police violence against peaceful protestors and the arrest and assault of media and international observers. It details the suppression of rights protected under the US Constitution, international law and international human rights agreements.

The report comes as police are “stocking up on riot gear,” as a report in the *Associated Press* put it, in preparation for renewed protests next month in the event that a grand jury fails to indict Darren Wilson, the Ferguson police officer who shot unarmed teenager Michael Brown on August 9.

“What Amnesty International witnessed in Missouri on the ground this summer underscored that human rights abuses do not just happen across borders and oceans,” said Steven W. Hawkins, executive director of Amnesty International USA.

Hawkins added, “Standing on W. Florissant Avenue with my colleagues, I saw a police force, armed to the teeth, with military-grade weapons. I saw a crowd that included the elderly and young children fighting the effects of tear gas.”

Police confronted protesters while “armed with semi-automatic weapons and leashed police dogs,” the report noted. “Officers moved among the protesters using armored vehicles which are more commonly seen in a conflict zone rather than the streets of a suburban town in the United States.” It added, “Some of the officers had... no names, badges, other identifying information visible.”

The report concluded, “In all, more than 170 individuals were arrested during the first 12 days of protests since Michael Brown’s death,” more than three quarters of arrests were for the ad-hoc charge of “failure to disperse.”

The report also documents the attack on free speech and the media. “Legal and human rights observers as well as members of the media have repeatedly been obstructed” by police, it noted.

“From August 13 through October 2, at least 19 journalists and members of the media were arrested by law enforcement with others subjected to tear gas and the use of rubber bullets... Reporters for CNN, Al Jazeera America and other outlets report being harassed or physically threatened.”

When Ron Johnson of the Missouri Highway Patrol, who nominally headed the police response in the area, was asked in a press conference why members of the press were being targeted for arrest, he replied, "It is difficult to tell who is media, and who is disguising themselves as such."

In one particularly shocking event, the report recounts how Ryan Devereaux of *The Intercept* and Lukas Hermsmeier of the *German Bild-Zeitung* were shot with rubber bullets and arrested while fleeing from a barrage of tear gas.

The report recounts,

"After coming out [from] behind a cover with their hands in the air, shouting, 'Press!' and 'Journalists' and 'We're media!' [an] officer allowed them to pass. However, as Devereaux and Hermsmeier continued walking with their hands in the air, shouting 'Press!' the same officer shot rubber bullets at them, hitting both journalists in the back. Out of fear, they dove behind a car. The officers approached with guns pointed and arrested them."

On another occasion Amnesty International observers were threatened by police while seeking to leave a protest scene after determining that they were in danger from tear gas and rubber bullets.

"One officer directly in front of the delegation pointed his weapon at the delegation and shouted 'get on the ground!' A staff member at the front of the delegation knelt on the ground and informed the officer, 'We are human rights observers.'"

In another incident, "Amnesty International witnessed an officer with the St. Ann Police Department in Missouri point his AR-15 semi-automatic rifle at a group of journalists and threaten to kill them."

The Amnesty International report noted that the practice of pointing firearms at peaceful protestors violates US law and international rules. "Under the U.N.'s Basic Principles for the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, law enforcement officials shall not use firearms against persons except in self-defense or defense of others against the imminent threat of death or serious injury." In addition, "An officer pointing a gun at close range at an unarmed individual who is not presenting a threat would also be excessive use of force under U.S. law."

The report concluded that the police attempt to "collectively punish" local residents and peaceful protestors. It noted that the imposition of a curfew "limited not only the rights of those who were demonstrating peacefully, but also the freedom of movement of the general public in Ferguson who were required to be off of the streets after midnight each night."

The illegal and unconstitutional character of the police response was summed up by an injunction issued by a federal judge earlier this month against the so-called "five second rule," an arbitrary directive that police used to abrogate the constitutionally protected freedom of assembly. The judge said the order allowed "police officers, if they felt like it, to order peaceful, law-abiding protestors to keep moving rather than standing still." She concluded, "As it was applied in this case, the practice...violates the constitution."

The Amnesty International report, together with the nationwide militarization of the police and the ongoing wave of police killings, makes a mockery of the claims by the United States military and politicians that the aims of the US's endless series of wars and international provocations is to defend "human rights."

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