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With the UN Convention against Torture coming into force in the Dominican Republic at the end of February, Amnesty International (AI) is once again calling on the authorities to break with the shameful practice of police abuse of detainees.

In a series of reports—the latest published in October 2011—AI has documented shocking levels of abuse, including torture and unlawful killings, carried out by police in the country.

Amnesty International researchers found that individuals are often detained and subjected to torture and other ill-treatment in police custody, frequently without being formally charged or convicted of any crime. Research by the organization also shows that most of these cases are not adequately investigated.

The US State Department’s most recent human rights report on the Dominican Republic, published in April 2011, came to a similar conclusion, stating, "Although the law prohibits torture, beating, and physical abuse of detainees and prisoners, members of the security forces, primarily police, continued such practices [in 2010]."

The State Department report continues, "Human rights groups and prisoners reported physical abuse of detainees, most commonly beatings. The National Human Rights Commission reported that the police continued to use different types of torture to obtain confessions from detained suspects, including beatings that left lifelong scars."

Government officials blame international plot

Responding to the criticism in February 2012, Interior and Police Minister José Ramón Fadul and Policía Nacional (PN) chief Maj. Gen. José Polanco Gómez said that there is a campaign to discredit the country, using the pretext of supposed human rights violations by law-enforcement officers.

Although Fadul did not specify who he thinks is orchestrating the campaign, he told local media that it comes from international organizations that make false accusations with the aim of damaging the image of the PN. The two officials told reporters that the Dominican population should not be surprised by this campaign, which was, they said, intended to damage the image of the police and the country in general.

The officials’ response echoed the line taken in the recent past when international human rights organizations have criticized the authorities’ treatment of the hundreds of thousands of undocumented Haitians living and working in the Dominican Republic (NotiCen, April 1, 2004, and Nov. 18, 2004). Periodically, the Dominican Army arbitrarily rounds up people suspected of being undocumented Haitians and deports them across the border to neighboring Haiti. Haitians who are born on Dominican soil are also systematically denied their due rights.

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Each time the country has been asked to explain its disregard for international human rights and refugee norms, officials have sought to rally nationalist opinion by denying any wrongdoing and instead accusing foreign organizations of a vilification campaign.

Now that the Dominican Republic has ratified the UN Convention against Torture, an international treaty that prohibits torture and other ill-treatment of police detainees, Javier Zúñiga, a special advisor to AI, is taking a conciliatory position. "The Dominican Republic should be commended for having joined this important international treaty to combat torture," said Zúñiga, "but the country’s authorities—and the Policía Nacional in particular—must end once and for all the decades-long practice of abuse and get to work to meet the treaty’s provisions by enforcing the law in a manner that respects human rights."

**Amnesty International documents abuse**

An Amnesty delegation, visiting the Dominican Republic in October to publish the organization’s latest report documenting the alarming levels of police violence, spoke to several men who claimed to have recently been tortured.

In the town of Bahiahibe, in the east of the country, Eduardo Concepción Portorreal said that on Oct. 2, 2011, he was hit behind his left ear with a gun by a policeman when he questioned his friend’s arrest. Eduardo fainted and woke up a few hours later, only to find he was covered in burns. Witnesses said that, while Eduardo was unconscious, the police officer burned him with the hot engine of his vehicle.

On Oct. 13, 2011, in San Cristóbal, in the southern Dominican Republic, a police officer beat Pedro Arias Roja in the head while arresting him on suspicion of stealing a firearm. In the police station, several officers placed a plastic bag over Pedro’s head and beat him even further.

Humberto Cabrera was in his house in La Romana, in the eastern Dominican Republic, when four plainclothes police officers from the anti-narcotics department came to arrest him on Sept. 17, 2011. When Cabrera questioned his arrest, a police officer shot him in the leg. The police dragged him outside, and one of them jumped on his wounded leg.

In the past decade, levels of violent crime have soared in the Dominican Republic, largely as a result of an increase in drug trafficking, a proliferation of firearms, and growing social inequality. But Amnesty contends that the unlawful and unprofessional conduct of many police officers is only contributing to the rise in crime and violence in the country.

"A hard-line approach to policing that tolerates unlawful killings, torture, and other ill-treatment in the name of greater effectiveness in tackling crime further brutalizes society. It sends a message that it is legitimate to take justice into one’s own hands, further alienates large parts of the population from the police, and increases lack of trust in the institution," said AI.

Zúñiga called for action, saying, "Victims of police torture in the Dominican Republic must have access to justice and be given adequate reparations for their suffering."

A year after the Convention against Torture treaty enters into force in the Dominican Republic, authorities will be required to submit a progress report to the UN Committee Against Torture.