



Analysis

Netherlands: Increased use of firearms by Dutch police

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Police in the Netherlands are increasingly drawing, and using, their firearms. This practice is being actively encouraged by police chiefs and the development has not been substantially criticised in the media. Other forms of police abuse are also on the rise. Since many police monitoring groups have ceased to function, there has been little public outcry at the situation.

Police officers are being encouraged to use their weapons more often, the national newspaper De Volkskrant reports. [1] Raad van Korpschefs, a spokesperson for the council of Police Chiefs, is quoted by the newspaper as saying: "in the past we were reluctant with violence. Nowadays we say: be quicker in drawing your gun and show it as a menace, fire a warning shot if necessary...If that does not produce the necessary effect, you [may] shoot at the legs if needs be." According to De Volkskrant this is part of a developing trend in which police are being instructed "to act more decisively."

It is not only firearms incidents that are on the rise in the Netherlands. Recent examples of serious abuse against arrestees and non-violent activists indicate that the police, and the politicians responsible for them, are increasingly losing respect for basic civil and human rights.

One telling incident that received much publicity involved the violent arrest of a drunken Latvian man in Rotterdam in June 2012. [2] The man, who was lying prostrate on the ground, was first pepper-sprayed and then repeatedly kicked, even though he did not show any aggression towards the police officers. The beating happened to be filmed by a bystander who posted the footage on a social media website, causing a considerable scandal and a debate in the Rotterdam city council. An investigation by the Public Prosecutor's Office (Openbaar Ministerie, OM) found that the police officers had done nothing wrong and therefore would not be prosecuted. According to the OM, their "conduct accorded to their instructions on the proper use of force", as the man had been resisting arrest, insulting and hitting the officers, but this had occurred before the filming had started [3]. In the city council an overwhelming majority (with only the Green-Left GroenLinks opposing) subsequently decided that the police officers had been unjustly portrayed by a negative media and that they should be sent a bouquet of flowers.

This incident is one of many, and the stock response to disquiet caused by allegations of police violence is almost always the same (see box below). 'Security' is a major theme in Dutch society, but for political rather than empirical reasons. Official statistics have repeatedly shown that crime has

been falling since 2000, but they also show that many members of the public feel vulnerable and demand law and order measures (although this trend is also decreasing). [4]

At elections (a general election was held in the Netherlands on 12 September) all of the major political parties made 'security' one of their top priorities and committed to increase spending on policing and 'combating crime.' As one police chief explained in straightforward language a few years ago in answer to complaints that the police were too violent: "If people keep asking for more police on the streets ['Meer Blauw op Straat' - "More Blue (uniforms) on the Street" is a common expression for increasing police numbers] they should not be surprised that the police are going to act."

Deaths in custody

Another worrying trend is the continuing occurrence of deaths in custody or after contact with police officers. The lack of public outcry over these deaths has been significantly influenced by the fact that police monitoring organisations have almost ceased to function in the Netherlands. This is also the case with civil rights, progressive lawyers and criminological organisations, which had a tradition of calling for alternatives to penal punishment.

This year alone, seven people have died in police custody. Others were killed in police car pursuits, for instance an 18-year old boy in Nieuw Buinen (Drente) who crashed into a tree while being pursued for driving a stolen car in August 2012. In the 1980s following the death of a squatter in police custody in Amsterdam's main police station, a monitoring group was set up which managed to attain some formal improvements in the treatment of arrestees. Not many of those improvements remain. The lack of accurate statistics makes it difficult to determine whether there has been an increase in deaths in custody. [6]

One recent case was the death of a Turkish man, Ihsan Gürz, at Beverwijk police station in July 2011. He was arrested for causing a nuisance in a snack bar. Police claimed the man was extremely violent during his arrest, but his family and friends denied this. What happened to him is unclear, but he died at the police station and his body had many injuries. As in too many of these incidents, it was left to his family and friends to publicise the death through the Turkish media. A response from NGOs and the authorities was lacking. The Turkish media [7] alleged that Gürz was tortured in police custody prompting the Turkish government to demand an official investigation. [8]

Police shootings

Unlike deaths in police custody, statistics are available for police shootings. [9] By law, every police shooting incident has to be registered and investigated by the internal police investigation department, the Rijksrecherche. Their figures show a clear increase in the use of firearms by the police:

- 2007: 16 cases registered (4 dead and 12 wounded)
- 2010: 25 cases registered (3 dead and 24 wounded)
- 2011: 5 people died and 29 wounded

In the first six months of 2012 four people were killed after being shot by police; this compares with three deaths over the same period in 2011.

One of the fatalities in 2011 was 31-year old Michael Koomen from Amstelveen. He was shot dead on 14 May 2011 by a policeman who intended to arrest him for damaging a bicycle. Koomen had gone to Amsterdam with his football team to celebrate winning their league. The group was rowdy as some of the members had drunk too much alcohol, but they were not aggressive. The police officer who fired the fatal shot, Fred Buffing, was driving a police-dog handler's van when he decided to stop and make the arrest on his own. As he was handcuffing two of the men, and trying to detain them in his van, their friends approached him. He said that he panicked and shot Martin Koomen in the head. He also shot two others in the stomach and legs, one of whom was Koomen's brother. Although Buffing had a history of aggressive behaviour towards those he arrested, and according to the media had clearly not told the truth about the circumstances of the shooting [10], the public prosecutor decided not to prosecute him.

References

[1] De Volkskrant 26.2.12 Agent Moet Sneller Naar Wapen Grijpen (not online)

[2] Rijnmond nieuws 19.6.12 <http://www.rijnmond.nl/nieuws/19-06-2012/filmpje-agente-schopt-weerloze-man>

[3] Rijnmond nieuws 26.6.12 <http://www.rijnmond.nl/nieuws/26-06-2012/schoppende-agente-niet-vervolgd>

[4] See Veelbelovende verklaringen voor de daling van de criminaliteit na 2002. Onderzoek in opdracht van de Commissie Politie en Wetenschap (2009) Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [Central Bureau of Statistics. Promising explanations for the reduction in crime after 2002. Research on behalf of the Commission Polie and Science],

www.politiewetenschap.nl/pdf/verklaringen_daling_criminaliteit_na_2002.pdf, and

http://www.nicis.nl/Wat_doen_wij/Verspreiding/Docbank/Veiligheid/Sociale_veiligheid/Onveiligheidsgevoelens/Dalende_trend_veelvoorkomende_criminaliteit_zet_door

[5] De Volkskrant 8.8.12

<http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2686/Binnenland/article/detail/3296204/2012/08/03/Agent-wiste-filmpje-van-gewelddadige-arrestatie.dhtml>

[6] Rijksrecherche [National Police Internal Investigation Department] (2006) De politie een zorg! Analyse van overlijdensgevallen onder de zorg van de politie 2000-2004 [The police – a concern! Analysis of deadly incidents in police care 2000-2004]

[7] Today's Zaman, 8.7.11 <http://www.todayzaman.com/news-249779-turkish-man-killed-under-severe-torture-in-dutch-police-station.html>

[8] Telegraaf, 6.2.12

http://www.telegraaf.nl/binnenland/11454751/___Rel_over_dode_Turkse_arrestant___html

[9] De Volkskrant, 30.7.12 Aantal Doden door Kogels van Politie Licht Gestegen, [Slight increase in number of deaths by police bullet]

[10] While the policeman claimed that he was being attacked by an angry mob and tried to fire a warning shot, footage from CCTV cameras and testimonies show that this was largely fabricated. The Zembra investigative television programme made a special report about the case with a reconstruction of events and footage from CCTV cameras, see [http://zembra.vara.nl/Afleveringen.1973.0.html?&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=53693&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=1963&cHash=4eb94ce802192e566f74600f1c933c06](http://zembra.vara.nl/Afleveringen.1973.0.html?&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=53693&tx_ttnews[backPid]=1963&cHash=4eb94ce802192e566f74600f1c933c06)

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