HRCP takes note of deaths in police custody

Lahore, 4 September: The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has taken serious note of at least four incidents involving suspects’ deaths in police custody. Earlier, in August, HRCP investigated reports that two young Hindu boys in Mirpur Khas – accused of murder – were allegedly tortured to death while in custody. In Punjab, in the last week alone, there have been three incidents involving death in custody in Lahore, Gujjarpura and Rahimyar Khan.

The latter case, in which Salahuddin Ayubi, a mentally disabled man accused of robbery, died allegedly as a result of custodial torture has, understandably, led to public outrage. Yet torture and ill treatment in custody are entrenched practices that are considered at best ‘acceptable’ and, at worst, ‘necessary’. Moreover, there are invariably delays in the post-mortem reports that should follow on the heels of any allegations of custodial death.

HRCP has already met the police authorities in Punjab and Sindh, and reiterated that the use of torture and humiliating, inhuman or degrading treatment is unacceptable - irrespective of the accusation or charge. HRCP has been reassured by the authorities in Punjab that they are willing to work closely with the Commission to protect human rights standards as an integral part of police procedures.

The inquiry into Salahuddin Ayubi’s death in custody is a positive sign, but respect for the inviolable human rights of those in custody must be embedded into police training and structures - matched by the necessary resources - if the police are to serve as protectors rather than antagonists. Moreover, such efforts need to be bolstered by an enforceable legal framework that criminalises torture, something on which the state must not procrastinate any longer.

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