



ACLU Asks Justice Department To Intervene In Serious Human Rights Abuses In Puerto Rico

Letter Cites Allegations Of Extreme Police Misconduct And Suppression Of Free Speech

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WASHINGTON – The American Civil Liberties Union sent a letter to the Department of Justice (DOJ) today urging it to intervene in serious human rights and civil liberties abuses reported to be occurring against the people of Puerto Rico at the hands of the territory's government. The ACLU asked that DOJ conclude its ongoing investigation of allegations of serious incidents of police violence and the suppression of free expression – including numerous reports of violent attacks against peaceful protesters and racially motivated police abuse – and take action to end these egregious practices.

“At a time when our nation is riveted by the power of peaceful demonstrations and their importance to our democracy, the horrific abuses reported to be taking place in Puerto Rico have flown too far under the radar,” said Anthony D. Romero, Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union. “It is nothing short of shocking to think that these breathtaking incidents could occur unchecked in America, and any abuses must be stopped.”

According to the letter signed by Romero, police abuse has escalated and free expression has been under threat since Gov. Luis Fortuño came into power two years ago. University students at peaceful protests have been subjected to violent attacks and arrest, while female students have been inappropriately touched by police officers during the protests. Government proceedings have been closed to the public and protesters at the legislature have been pepper sprayed, beaten and shot at by police. Tens of thousands of workers have been fired and their criticism of government policies repressed.

The ACLU's letter, addressed to Assistant Attorney General Thomas Perez, details many examples of allegations of police abuse and speech suppression, including:

- violence against student protesters, with students being beaten, maced, shot at with rubber bullets and sexually assaulted by police;

- violence against protesters on the steps of the legislature after government proceedings were closed to the public;
- racially-motivated beatings of members of minority communities by police officers;
- the execution of a man lying on the ground following an argument with a police officer over a traffic violation;
- the unsolved murder of a man of African-Puerto Rican descent, suspected to be an extrajudicial killing by police officers;
- the fabrication of drug-related charges against over 100 residents of a housing project in the city of Mayaguez;
- the violent and inhumane eviction of members of the Villas del Sol squatter community, including the denial of fresh water to the community for eight months;
- numerous incidents of abuse of the homeless by police officers; and
- the de-certification of the Puerto Rico Bar Association and legal action against bar members designed to stifle political dissent.

The letter concludes: “[T]hese allegations raise troubling questions about the Puerto Rican government’s commitment to the human rights of its citizens and the First Amendment’s protections of freedom of assembly, expression and the right to petition the government. We hope that DOJ will soon conclude its investigation and intervene into these unconstitutional practices.”

The letter called on the Civil Rights Division of the DOJ to release a report of its findings.

The full text of the letter to the Department of Justice can be found below: