

the nation

Philadelphia charged for condoning brutality

United Press International
WASHINGTON — The Justice Department Monday charged the city of Philadelphia and Mayor Frank Rizzo with systematically condoning police brutality ranging from shootings to beatings.

In an unprecedented move to halt civil rights abuses by law enforcement officers, the government filed suit alleging that entrenched city policies "directly contribute" to such brutality in Philadelphia.

The suit was filed in U.S. district court in Philadelphia, plagued in recent years with an estimated 1,200 brutality complaints a year, 75 involving police shootings. Victims of the shootings, the suit says, are overwhelmingly black or Hispanic.

It names as defendants the city, Rizzo — once a detective and later the city's police commissioner — current Police Commissioner Joseph O'Neill and 18 other top city officials.

They are accused of condoning policies that permit police to commit random beatings, unjustified shootings and other flagrant civil rights violations.

In Philadelphia, Deputy Mayor Tony Zecca quoted Rizzo as saying of the suit, "We welcome it."

Zecca declined comment for himself, other than to call the suit "ludicrous."

Rizzo told the U.S. civil rights commission at hearings last April: "I don't see any problem with police misconduct." He said the problem is "all media generated."

But the suit cites evidence that O'Neill viewed a videotape of a police officer beating a passive, handcuffed prisoner, yet took no action. The prisoner, following discussions with police, never filed a complaint.

It says some officers have been commended and promoted after

abusing people, including six detectives who were convicted of beating confessions out of an innocent arson suspect in 1975. All six have been promoted within the department.

The suit, filed following a months-long investigation by special litigation counsel Louis M. Thrasher, lists a number of police and city policies that have helped covered up the abuses. Among them:

—Brutality investigators "intentionally fail to develop evidence that would impeach the credibility of the officers."

—Charges are filed against victims of police beatings to support an officer's explanation for abusing a person or to intimidate victims not to complain about brutality.

—O'Neill and his top deputies discuss conclusions of internal brutality investigations in advance and altered them to suit their own views.

—Investigators take statements from witnesses to police shootings "in a manner calculated to justify the shooting," and sometimes tip off the shooting officers to evidence gathered before the officers are questioned.

—Brutality victims often are pressured to take lie detector tests, while the offending officers or police who witness the abuses are not.

—Investigators accept "implausible accounts" by police officers for brutality.

—The city changed its policies last year so its jails no longer ask newly received prisoners about their injuries, or report or photograph the injuries. Such photographs had previously provided incriminating evidence against police.

—Decisions on discipline often are reached in consultation with O'Neill before investigations are completed.

—The police department has a "purposefully fragmented" approach to brutality investigations, including a conflict of interest. Its homicide and detective divisions are assigned to prepare prosecutions of criminal suspects, but also must investigate the officers who beat those suspects at the time of arrest.

The suit says only in the rarest cases have officers been disciplined for on-duty actions.

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