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Rare Canada police conviction puts spotlight on race relations

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By Alastair Sharp and Allison Lampert

TORONTO/MONTREAL (Reuters) - A six-year prison sentence given to a Toronto policeman in the shooting death of a teenager three years ago was a rare occurrence in Canada, where activists say officers too often get off easy in brutality cases.

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The case, along with this week's death of a black man who witnesses say was beaten by police officers, has brought race relations in Canada to the forefront.

The 2013 fatal shooting of Sammy Yatim, 18, which occurred after an altercation on a streetcar with the teen, who was brandishing a knife, was caught on video and led to widespread protests in Toronto.

The sentencing of the officer, James Forcillo, who was convicted in January, came days after a mentally ill black man, Abdurahman Abdi, died following his arrest by police in Ottawa.

The deaths have shone an unflattering light on race relations in Canada, which prides itself on its multiculturalism and tolerance, especially in contrast to the United States.

In Montreal, about 50 protesters demonstrated over Abdi's death, chanting: "Black lives matter." Marlihan Lopez said that as the mother of a 6-year-old black boy with autism, the case hit close to home.

"In terms of the police, we live in a world where my son's skin color is deemed as being threatening and his mental state is not understood," she said.

The deaths echoed events in the United States, where a string of police killings of black men and allegations of police brutality and racial bias have sparked protests. Some confrontations in the United States were also caught on video.

Julian Falconer, a lawyer for Yatim's mother, said police needed more training to deal with mentally ill people as well as lapel cameras to ensure accountability.

"You have people that are not well and they are shot like dogs in the street," he told reporters.

"It's a tragic day for the Forcillo family, for the Yatim family, for the community, and for policing," said Michael McCormack, president of the Toronto Police Association union.

"There's never going to be any good outcome from this and it's tragic all around."

ACTIVISTS: SHOOTINGS UNDERREPORTED

Last year, a Toronto police officer shot and killed Andrew Loku, a 45-year-old Sudanese immigrant with a history of mental illness. No charges were filed.

Sandy Hudson, co-founder of Black Lives Matter Toronto, the only official Canadian chapter of the movement, said police shootings were underreported by media in Canada because surveillance footage was not as accessible and data was not always compiled by race north of the border.

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"The reason for our existence is to dispel the myth that it is somehow safer in Canada, that it doesn't happen in Canada," she said.

The group strategizes with Black Lives Matters' national chapter in Los Angeles, which has provided organizational support for larger protests, she added.

Ontario's Special Investigations Unit, or SIU,, an arms-length agency that investigates cases of death, serious injury or sexual assault involving police, launched 266 cases in the 2014-15 fiscal year, including six shooting deaths, 12 deaths in custody and 41 sexual assault allegations.

Of the 253 cases it closed that year, the SIU laid charges in 5.1 percent of them. There were no charges laid in the shooting deaths.

The agency does not make public the evidence behind its decision not to lay charges and its unredacted investigation reports are not released under freedom of information laws, drawing criticism that the SIU is too quick to clear police.

"There's a reluctance on the part of a lot of Canadians to deal frankly with the history of racism in Canada," said Barrington Walker, an associate professor of African-Canadian history at Queen's University in Kingston.

"The myths are still powerful and people have a lot invested in the myths, but you can see a counter argument emerging that is getting harder and harder to ignore."

(Additional reporting by Leah Schnurr in Ottawa and Allison Martell in Toronto; Writing by Amran Abocar; Editing by Alan Crosby and Peter Cooney)

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