

Nation & World Report

Should Norway police be armed?

RAMPAGE DEATH TOLL
DROPS TO 76

Violent crime rate
steadily inching up

BY MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ
The New York Times

OSLO, Norway — When a man dressed in a police uniform began slaughtering young people at a Norwegian summer camp last week, one of the first to be killed was a real police officer named Trond Bertsen, who for years had worked in security at the camp.

Whether Bertsen tried to stop the gunman is still being debated. But facing a man carrying multiple guns and ample ammunition, there was little he could do. Like most other police officers here, he had no weapon.

By law, Norwegian police officers must have authorization from their chief to gain access to a firearm, but they have rarely needed to ask, until recently. Violent crime has been steadily increasing, joining a society used to leaving doors unlocked and children to play without fear.

Coupled with growing criticism over the police's slow response time to the attacks and confusion about the death toll, which was lowered Monday to 76 from 93, there are growing questions about whether the police are equipped to deal with the challenges.

"Criminals are now carrying weapons, so some people now think that police officers should have weapons as well," said Gry Jorum Holmen, a spokeswoman for the Norwegian police union.

It took police SWAT units more than an hour to reach the camp, on Utøya Island, after reports of the shooting came in. Officers had to drive to the shore across from the site of the shooting attack and use boats to get to the island. A police helicopter was unable to get off the ground.

A vigil to honor the victims of last week's attack in Norway will be held at 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Nordic Heritage Museum, 3014 N.W. 67th St., Seattle. There will be a moment of silence and offering of prayers for the victims. On Friday, an ecumenical prayer service will be held at St. James Cathedral, Ninth Avenue and Marion Street in Seattle. The service begins at 6:30 p.m.

Seattle Times staff

He'd hoped that the first hearing into last week's twin attacks, which he had suggested in an online manifesto that would be "marketing" for his beliefs, would be televised live by the world's media. He wanted to dress in a uniform to defend his actions as part of a bid to trigger an anti-Islamic revolution in Europe.

The Norwegian judge, however, ruled the proceedings should be held behind closed doors. Breivik was formally charged with violating Norway's anti-terrorism laws and remanded to solitary confinement for the next four weeks.

Norway is one of only three Western European countries lacking a fully armed police force. Most police officers in Britain and Iceland do not carry firearms

frequency of rape and other assault has inched ever higher, statistics show. Murder rates, however, have remained stable.

The increasing presence of foreign criminal networks active in Norway is part of the reason for higher crime rates, Holmen and others said, though domestic criminal groups have also become more brazen.

While Norwegian crime rates still look insignificant compared with a country like the U.S., the uptick in violence, however small, has unsettled many here.

Now only beat police officers in patrol cars have immediate access to weapons. By law, however, they have to remain unloaded and locked in a box in the car unless authorization is given.

Some experts worry that arming police officers would only lead to an escalation of violence as criminals arm themselves in response. For many, though, resistance to the idea has more to do with national pride.

"I would prefer to live in a society where police normally work unarmed," said Johannes Knutsson, a professor at the Norwegian Police



Anders Behring Breivik, left, the suspect in the bombing and shooting rampage in his native Norway, leaves an Oslo courthouse in a police car Monday.

JON-ARE BERG-JACOBSEN / AFP / GETTY IMAGES