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Paris, January 27 (RHC)-- In a first for France, six nongovernmental organizations launched a class-action lawsuit on Wednesday against the French government for alleged systemic discrimination by police

officers carrying out identity checks.

The organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, contend that French police use racial profiling in ID checks, targeting Black people and people of Arab descent.

They were serving Prime Minister Jean Castex and France's interior and justice ministers with formal legal notice of demands for concrete steps and deep law enforcement reforms to ensure that racial profiling does not determine who gets stopped by police. The organizations, which also include the Open Society Justice Initiative and three French grassroots groups, plan to spell out the legal initiative at a news conference in Paris.

The issue of racial profiling by French police has been debated for years, including but not only the practice of officers performing identity checks on young people who are often Black or of Arab descent and live in impoverished housing projects.

Serving notice is the obligatory first step in a two-stage lawsuit process. The law gives French authorities four months to talk with the NGOs about meeting their demands. If the parties behind the lawsuit are left unsatisfied after that time, the case will go to court, according to one of the lawyers, Slim Ben Achour.

It is the first class-action discrimination lawsuit based on colour or supposed ethnic origins in France. The NGOs are employing a little-used 2016 French law that allows associations to take such a legal move.

"It's revolutionary, because we're going to speak for hundreds of thousands, even a million people." Ben Achour told The Associated Press news agency in a phone interview. The NGOs are pursuing the class action on behalf of racial minorities who are mostly second- or third-generation French citizens. "The group is brown and Black," Ben Achour said. The four-month period for reaching a settlement could be prolonged if the talks are making progress, but if not, the NGOs will go to court, he said.

The abuse of identity checks has served for many in France as emblematic of broader alleged racism within police ranks, with critics claiming that misconduct has been left unchecked or whitewashed by authorities.

The NGOs are seeking reforms rather than monetary damages, especially changes in the law governing identity checks. The organisations argue the law is too broad and allows for no police accountability because the actions of officers involved cannot be traced, while the stopped individuals are left humiliated and sometimes angry.

Among other demands, the organizations want an end to the longstanding practice of gauging police performance by numbers of tickets issued or arrests made, arguing that the benchmarks can encourage baseless identity checks.

The lawsuit features some 50 witnesses, both police officers and people subjected to abusive checks, whose accounts are excerpted in the letters of notice. The NGOs cite one unnamed person who spoke of undergoing multiple police checks every day for years.

A police officer posted in a tough Paris suburb who is not connected with the case told the AP that he is often subjected to ID checks when he is wearing civilian clothes.

"When I'm not in uniform, I'm a person of colour," said the officer, who asked to remain anonymous in keeping with police rules and due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Police need a legal basis for their actions, "but 80 percent of the time they do checks (based on) heads" — meaning how a person looks.

Omer Mas Capitolin, the head of Community House for Supportive Development, a grassroots NGO taking part in the legal action, called it a "mechanical reflex" for French police to stop people of colour, a practice he said is damaging to the person being checked and ultimately to relations between officers and

the members of the public they are expected to protect.

“When you’re always checked, it lowers your self-esteem,” and you become a “second-class citizen”, Mas Capitolin said. The “victims are afraid to file complaints in this country even if they know what happened isn’t normal,” he said, because they fear fallout from neighbourhood police.

He credited the case of George Floyd, the Black American who died last year in Minneapolis after a white police officer pressed his knee into Floyd’s neck, with raising consciences and becoming a catalyst for change in France. However, the NGOs make clear that they are not accusing individual police of being racist because “they act within a system that allowed these practices to spread and become installed,” the groups said in a joint document.

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