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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 4 — The police shot dead 88 people last year, the most in the past decade, prompting human rights activists to call for accountability from the force.

The Lawyers for Liberty group revealed the breakdown of fatal shootings from 2000 to 2009, as

well as the identity of the victims, which they said was obtained from a reluctant Bukit Aman CID deputy director Datuk Acryl Sani Abdullah Sani.

The senior police officer was a witness in the P. Uthayakumar sedition case last Monday where he revealed the data, which included details of race, nationalities, names and age. The most was 88 in 2009 with the least being five in 2001.

There was a slight fluctuation in numbers between five and 27 deaths prior to the year 2008. Out of the 279 suspects who were fatally shot in the last decade, 81 of them were unidentified.

One of them, a Liberian, classified under “Negro”, David Saah, was a refugee under the UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, one of the 82 recorded fatal shootings in 2008.

Lawyer for Liberty group member N. Surendran claimed the data proves that the police are above the law in this country.

“This shows that what has taken root in the police force is a lawless tendency,” he said, calling it a threat to Malaysians and to the public order.

Subang MP R. Sivarasa, who was also at the press conference, called it a “culture of impunity”.

“It means that they feel that they can do as they wish and they won’t be held accountable... they can shoot, kill, and there won’t be any questions asked, there won’t be any investigations and that they can continue doing so,” he said.

The PKR lawmaker also claimed that the home minister was at the forefront of blindly defending the police force before any investigations were done.

Sivarasa attributed the high number of fatalities to the reluctance of the federal leaders to set up an efficient Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC).

The Bar Council had been calling to set up such independent body to “keep the police in check”.

Lucas Yap, a co-ordinator for Suaram, alleged that most of the police involved in the shootings were not in uniform and did not fire warning shots before fatally shooting the suspects.

Sivarasa highlighted that in many countries such as the UK, every shot fired by the police will automatically be investigated by the department. The officers would need to explain at length to their superior and file paperwork to justify his or her actions. The shots that led to injuries or deaths, there will be a public inquest, which is a full court hearing.

“In Malaysia ... inquests are only mandatory for death in custody, that means you have to die in the lockup first,” he said bluntly. The most recent example of a public inquest is the one ongoing, on Teoh Beng Hock’s death under the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) custody last year.

As for the fatal police shootings, the most recent case involved Muhammad Hanafi Omar, 22, Muhammad Shamil Hafiz Shapie, 15, and Hairul Nizam Tuah, 20, who were gunned down by the police after a reported high-speed car chase in the early morning of November 13 in Glenmarie, Shah Alam.

Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Ismail Omar had defended the police involved and said that they have responded well in foiling the bid of the gang from robbing a petrol station.

“As you can see, even before there is an investigation, the IGP has exonerated his men. So there is no intention of carrying out a proper investigation, there is no intention of finding out whether those shootings were done, are unlawful killing or murder, or was it actually done in self-defence. So this is why police feel they are able to go around shooting people and killing them in cold blood because immediately the highest police officer comes out defending them.

“They know they can commit murder without being called into account and that is a tremendous power to put in the hands of a human being to tell him that go ahead, commit murder, we will protect you,” Surendran said.

Prior to the trio’s deaths by shooting, 15-year-old Aminulrasyid Amzah’s fatal shooting in April this year grabbed nationwide headlines and sparked a new public interest in such police shootings.

Besides Aminulrasyid, a second case involving the fatal shooting of 18-year-old Mohd Afham Arin in Johor Baru on October 20 last year has also surfaced after the victim’s mother recently

demanded an independent commission to investigate the case.

Sivarasa said the current guidelines for the usage of firearms is under the Inspector-General of Police's Standing Order and the document is classified.

Former Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Musa Hassan had said that it will not be a problem to make the document public and that the public will no longer blindly blame the police of abuse, although the Home Minister was reported as saying that he had not received any proposal from the special task force overseeing police investigations into the fatal shooting of teenage Aminulrasyid to do so.

Fadia Nadwa Fikri from Lawyers for Liberty claimed that Suhakam, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, had asked the police to reveal the IGSO contents, but the request was rejected.

"It is shocking and they are not prepared to answer to the public what they have been doing all these while," she said. Sivarasa said the only option now is for the public to put pressure on the political authorities responsible for Polis Di Raja Malaysia (PDRM).

“I’ve given up on PDRM. The only hope now is the political masters who are ultimately responsible to the rakyat and I think this is where the rakyat must demand accountability,” he said, pointing specifically to the Home Minister.

“The rakyat will ultimately hold him accountable,” he warned.

He accused the police involved in the shootings of viewing themselves as the “judge, jury and executioner”, calling it an “extrajudicial killing”.

“It is what you call a desperate response to an ineffective police force,” he said.