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Death under detention

THE Prime Minister, Mr Vorster, is at the moment acting as Minister of Police while Mr Muller is overseas. In both capacities he should without delay do two things.

Firstly, he should issue as full a statement as possible about the circumstances surrounding the death of a detained Indian man, Mr Ahmed Timol, who yesterday fell from a 10th-floor office at John Vorster Square police station, Johannesburg. A senior police officer is reported to have said: "He jumped . . . he committed suicide."

Secondly, the Prime Minister should immediately announce an investigation, preferably by a judicial commission, into all aspects of the treatment of detainees while they are being held and interrogated by the Security Police. Such a commission should be instructed to inquire into and report upon all suspect deaths during detention and to make recommendations designed to ensure that detainees are not subjected to ill-treatment.

The Prime Minister should do this not only because there is a growing public demand for such action but also in the interests of the Security Police and the Government itself.

If the Security Police have nothing to hide about the treatment of detainees, then such an inquiry will clear their good name. If, on the contrary, as many people suspect, there is ill-treatment of detainees, then the facts should be established and steps taken immediately to stop it.

It is as simple as that and there should be no argument or evasion about it any longer. Detainees, no matter who they are or how heinous the offences of which they are suspected, are, like all other people in custody, innocent until they are proved guilty in a court of law and should be treated as such.

It is scandalous that there should be even a suspicion that men should prefer death by suicide to detention, quite appalling that people should be driven to believe that the police use methods which all civilised men can only regard with horror. The Government has prevaricated far too long on this issue. Now it must act.