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Stories of torture in the 21st century

Electric shock torture by Egyptian police

"They stripped me, put a dirty sock in my mouth and threw cold water over me. I could barely breathe."
Wa'el Tawfiq

Wa'el Tawfiq, an active member of the Egyptian People's Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada, was arrested during the Cairo International Book Fair on 22 January 2002. He was then taken to the State Security Investigations headquarters at Lazoghly Square, Cairo where he was held for two days. During this time he was subjected to electric shocks and other forms of torture. He was blindfolded, stripped to his underwear and surrounded by four officers who punched and kicked him. Then electric shocks were applied to his right wrist. The next day, a dirty sock was placed in his mouth and bottles of freezing water were poured over him, severely restricting his breathing. Wa'el Tawfiq can identify at least one of the officers who tortured him and he filed a detailed complaint. Yet the authorities have taken no steps towards prosecuting those responsible for his torture.

In a separate incident on 12 April 2003 Wa'el Tawfiq was detained again, along with several others, at an unknown location in Cairo in connection with his anti-war activities. He was reportedly held for several days at the State Security Investigations headquarters, where he was allegedly subjected to torture or ill-treatment. He was released in early June 2003.

Torture -- a tool of terror in Guatemala

"...He had been decapitated and his ears, nose and eyes removed," a witness describes the dead body of murdered human rights activist Manuel García de la Cruz

Manuel García de la Cruz was tortured and murdered on 6 September 2002. When his body was recovered, he had been decapitated and his ears, nose and eyes removed. His death was a brutal warning to human rights defenders as it followed months of threats and harassment directed at human rights groups, including the ransacking of the offices of the indigenous human rights organization CONAVIGUA and other organizations in July 2002.

Manuel García de la Cruz was a human rights activist in CONAVIGUA which works to secure the human rights of Guatemala's indigenous people. He was working alongside women who had lost members of their family during the years of armed conflict in which some 200,000 people -- the vast majority indigenous -- were killed. He was involved in exhumations of clandestine mass graves and in accompanying widows to court to seek justice on behalf of victims of what has been widely recognised as a genocide. Legal suits are at present being brought in Guatemala against ex-members of Guatemala's military high command of the 1980s for genocide, war crimes and other crimes against humanity.

Indonesian human rights activists tortured and killed

"No, not here...," an Indonesian military commander tells his men to finish off the captives somewhere less public when their vehicle stops at a military checkpoint

Ernita binti Wahab, Idris Yusuf, Bakhtiar Usman and Nazaruddin Abdul Gani worked with the organization Rehabilitation Action for Torture Victims in Aceh (RATA) in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province (then known as Aceh). On 6 December 2000 they were stopped by around 14 men in unmarked vehicles. The four were ordered from their vehicle at gunpoint, beaten with rifle butts, and had shots fired near their feet. They were then driven away. After about three hours they stopped and Ernita binti Wahab and Idris Yusuf were taken out and shot in the head at point-blank range. Nazaruddin Abdul Gani managed to escape. Bakhtiar Usman's body was later found at the scene.

A police investigation led to the arrest of four civilians and four soldiers. However, the four civilians escaped in March 2001 and the four military personnel were released after their detention orders expired. The Indonesian Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) announced in January 2001 that it would investigate the killings, but an investigation team was never established.

Human rights defender harassed and threatened in Turkey

"We are measuring your coffin," a telephone death threat to Turkish human rights activist Eren Keskin

Eren Keskin is a lawyer and a human rights activist in Turkey. Her work focuses on exposing the torture of women prisoners in Turkey. She is also one of the founders of a legal aid project for women survivors of sexual assault in custody. Eren Keskin has been repeatedly harassed because of her work. She has been receiving telephone death threats, has been shot at, physically assaulted by a police officer and held in arbitrary detention. Eren Keskin has faced 86 lawsuits in relation to her human rights activities. In one trial she was charged with "insulting the state security forces". In another one she was charged with disseminating "separatist propaganda" after participating in a panel discussion on Violence against Women. However, the Turkish authorities have yet to show any determination to use the courts to bring the torturers to justice.

Human rights lawyer tortured with electrodes in Zimbabwe

"They electrified me on my genitals, on my toes, in my mouth, and they said 'this is the mouth you use to defend human rights'," human rights lawyer Gabriel Shumba

Gabriel Shumba was a lawyer with the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, which provides advice and assistance to many torture victims. Gabriel Shumba was arrested by police on 15 January 2003 with four other people including an opposition Member of Parliament. When Gabriel Shumba appeared in court on 17 January, medical evidence was presented supporting his claim that he had been subjected to electric shocks from electrodes placed on his tongue, feet and genitals.

This was no isolated incident: Amnesty International has documented a pattern of harassment, arbitrary arrest and torture in Zimbabwe. Rarely, if ever, are those responsible brought to justice. People who expose human rights violations are themselves at risk of arrest and torture. Those who stand up for an independent judiciary face intimidation. Human rights defenders in Zimbabwe fear for their safety and in some cases, for their lives.

For more information about Amnesty International's work on 26 June, UN International Day in Support of the Victims of Torture, please visit:
http://www.web.amnesty.org/mavp/av.nsf/pages/tortureday

For more information on our Stop Torture campaign, please visit: http://www.amnesty.org/stoptorture

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