

# £SUDAN

## @Outside the war zones: secret detention and torture in northern Sudan

### Introduction

The civil war between the Sudan government and both factions of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which is being fought mainly in southern Sudan and adjacent areas, continues to cause immense suffering. The human cost of this conflict stands condemned in world opinion. The violation of human rights, as Amnesty International has detailed in previous reports, lies at its heart.<sup>1</sup> One of the quickest ways of reducing the scale and frequency of gross human rights violations in the Sudan would be to end the war, with international human rights safeguards built in to the peace agreement.

However, human rights violations are also taking place in Sudan far from the conflict zones for reasons largely unconnected with the war. Since June 1989 when the current government seized power the authorities have dismantled civil society in Sudan and reshaped it according to their own interpretation of Islam. The civil service, trade unions, the judiciary and educational institution have all been purged to ensure that political supporters of the government have overwhelming influence. The government continues to repress the population in all parts of the country. Political activity remains forbidden; opposition of any form leads to detention without charge or trial and, often, torture.

This dimension of the human rights situation in Sudan is serious and must not be forgotten. Ending the war will not put a stop to human rights violations unless it also puts a stop to the repressive conduct of the government in *all* parts of the country. This report describes the continuing pattern of detention, torture, release and re-arrest of suspected political opponents in northern Sudan by focussing on the first six months of 1994. The information is largely about the capital, Khartoum, but arrests have also taken place in other towns and cities in northern Sudan. What is described here is only a part of the total number of people who were arrested between January and June 1994 about which information is so far fragmentary and difficult to confirm.

Amnesty International has the names of 78 people who were arrested and detained without charge or trial in the first six months of this year. Some were held for a mere 24

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<sup>1</sup> For example, *Sudan: The ravages of war: political killings and humanitarian disaster* (AI Index: AFR 54/29/93), and *Sudan in Amnesty International Report 1994* (AI Index: POL 10/02/94).

hours. Others spent several months in detention. At least 50 were individuals from trade unions or banned political parties suspected by the authorities of being opposition activists. The report also gives details of torture by security officials of prisoners arrested in 1993 who were charged with conspiracy to engage in acts of sabotage and tried in early 1994. Their testimonies of torture were confirmed by medical examinations ordered by the court.

Since the government of Lieutenant-General Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir seized power in June 1989 hundreds of prisoners of conscience from all sectors of society have been detained without charge or trial. They have been held for periods ranging from a few weeks to nearly two years. Many released prisoners are re-arrested. The majority are held incommunicado in "ghost houses", or in the security headquarters in Khartoum. Neither detainees' families nor, often, the detainees themselves are told where they are held. Many are subjected to torture and ill-treatment. In some cases this has led to deaths. Detention is, by and large, short-term, making it difficult at any one time due to the rapid turnover of prisoners, to be certain about total numbers of detainees. In addition the authorities have introduced a system of physical restriction tantamount to detention which consists of making individuals suspected of opposing government policies report daily to the security headquarters or a security office. They are then made to wait until the evening, normally without being questioned or provided with food or water. This form of restriction on an individual's freedom of movement has lasted from a few weeks to several months.

## **Political Detainees January to June 1994**

### ***Suspected activists from banned political parties***

**Sadiq al-Mahdi**, the leader of the opposition Umma Party and Ansar order of Islam, and a former Prime Minister, was held for 24 hours in April and then for 13 days in June and July. Other members of the Umma Party were arrested at the beginning of February. At least two, **al-Fadil Adam Ismail**, secretary general of the banned party's youth wing, and **Abdallah Barakat**, an Imam in the Ansar order of Islam, had been arrested on several previous occasions. Other Umma Party members were questioned at the end of the month. In April **Sarah Nugdallah**, a member of the Umma party's women's and executive committees, one of those questioned in February, was detained. She was held for 10 weeks in Omdurman Women's Prison before being released in late June. **Abdel Rasoul al-Nur**, a former governor of Kordofan who had spent long periods in detention in previous years, was also detained in early April, released after a few days and then re-arrested in late May. He was again released in late June after falling ill. More Umma Party members were arrested in late May. **Fadlalla Burma Nasir**, former Minister of State for Defence was released after 20 days. In May, **Hamad Omar Bagadi** and **Abdel Rahman Farah**, a former security adviser to the previous government, were arrested after being accused of involvement in a supposed plot to blow up government installations and to assassinate prominent political figures. Hamad Omar Bagadi

was released after two months although Abdel Rahman Farah was still believed to be in detention in mid-August 1994.

Members of other opposition political parties were also arrested during the first half of 1994. In February **Osman Omar al-Sharif**, a former Minister of Justice and prominent member of the Democratic Unionist party (DUP), was held for 11 days at security offices in Wad Medani before being transferred to a "ghost house" in Khartoum. He was reportedly released in April. He had previously spent two years in prison between 1989 and 1991 after being convicted at an unfair military trial on charges of corruption which appear to have been brought for political reasons. In late 1993 he was detained for a month on suspicion of instigating a strike by merchants in Wad Medani.

Activists from the Sudan Communist Party (SCP) have also been regular targets for the security services. **Mahjoub Mohamed Sherif**, popularly known in Sudan as "the people's poet", was arrested in May 1994 with **Bushra 'Abd al-Karim**, the secretary general of the Sudanese Youth Union, a pro-SCP organization, and **Salah al-A'lim**, a trade unionist. Mahjoub Mohamed Sherif was previously in detention between 1989 and 1991.

### ***Trade unionists***

In addition to banning opposition of political parties since seizing power in 1989, independent trade unions have also been targeted by the government. Although not illegal, the unions have been re-formed by the government to try to ensure they are under official control. Intimidation and arrests of activists opposing the authorities in advance of trade union elections in 1992 ensured that only supporters of the government were elected. In the first six months of 1994, trade unionists have continued to be a target of the government.

Many have been similarly arrested, questioned, held uncharged, released and then re-arrested. **Magdi Mohamedani**, a doctor active in the banned Sudan Doctors Union, was arrested in December 1993 and detained until 6 April 1994. He was previously arrested in August 1992 when he was held until November 1992, and in April 1990 when he was detained until November 1990. On all three occasions he was held without being charged or tried. In March 1994, **Kamal Abdelwahab Nur al-Dayem**, active in the banned Sudan Teachers Union, was arrested and held until May. In late 1993 he had been made to report daily to a security office in Khartoum North. In June 1994 **Ali al-Mahi al-Sakhi**, president of the Central Foundry Workers Union, was among six activists arrested near Khartoum. This was at least his third time to be taken into detention.

### ***Journalists***

Journalists are another professional sector which continues to face repression under the current government. Immediately after the coup in 1989, all newspapers except the pro-government armed forces publication *al-Quwat al-Musalla* (Armed Forces) were closed

down. The independent press remained banned until January 1994 when Sudan's first independent newspaper since the government seized power was allowed to start publication. The existence of the paper, *al-Sudani al-Douliya*, edited by Mahjoub Mohamed al-Hassan Erwa, a member of the government-appointed Transitional National Assembly (TNA), was short lived. Although in overall support of the government's political ideology, *al-Sudani al-Douliya* followed an independent editorial line and did not shrink at times from criticising government policy and the manner of its implementation. On 24 February 1994 **Moatisim Mahmud**, the paper's news editor, was arrested and detained until 19 April 1994. Articles critical of government policy continued to appear and in early April the authorities used the emergency regulations to ban the newspaper for "raising doubts about the purpose and struggle of the armed forces and People's Defence Forces" and for having the aim of "destroying the revolution". **Mahjoub Mohamed al-Hassan Erwa** and two other journalists were detained. The Minister of Justice and Attorney General had earlier announced that they were to face charges under article 66 of the Penal Code for "propagating false news", an offence which carries a six month prison sentence. However the two journalists were freed on 18 April and Mahjoub Mohamed al-Hassan Erwa was freed in June. The newspaper remained banned.

On 23 June 1994 **Mohamed Abdulsid**, a journalist with *al-Khartoum* newspaper published in Cairo, was arrested shortly after he had interviewed Sadiq al-Mahdi, the leader of the opposition Umma Party and Ansar order of Islam, and a former Prime Minister. The journalist is reported to have been accused of involvement in a conspiracy with Sadiq al-Mahdi and other members of the Umma Party who were also detained (see above). Mohamed Abdulsid is reported to have been kicked and beaten in his office before he was taken away. Previously, in early 1993, when he worked as the Khartoum correspondent of the international daily paper *Asharq al-Awsat*, he had been held for two months at Khartoum security headquarters and in a "ghost house". As of mid-August 1994, Mohamed Abdulsid was believed to be still in detention.

Employees of church-based relief agencies

**Baha' Zaki, Ashraf Adli and Magdi Chelata**, Egyptian Christian aid workers working on an education project for southern Sudanese displaced in Khartoum by the war, were arrested on 18 April 1994. The next day **Kamal Tadros**, an Egyptian Roman Catholic deacon in charge of the aid project, was also detained. They were all employed by the Roman Catholic Church to work on an education program for persons living in squatter camps on the edges of Khartoum. Kamal Tadros was held for one week and the others were released in May.

## **Torture and ill-treatment**

The Government of Sudan has denied that torture and ill-treatment are official policy. Indeed, they point out that under both the Penal Code and the National Security laws torture is a criminal offence. The reality is that torture by security officials is systematic.

Amnesty International has received numerous testimonies from former detainees which detail the torture and ill-treatment to which they have been subjected by security officials while in detention. Methods include brutal beatings, being made to lie on hot metal plates until their skin is badly burnt, being made to stand for long periods of time in the sun, various forms of physical contortion or repetitive exercise as well as degrading treatment.

The authorities rarely bring suspected political opponents to trial and therefore it is rare for prisoners to have the platform a trial provides for them to be able to describe their torture publicly. But in one unusual case, ten men arrested in April 1993 on suspicion of conspiring to cause acts of sabotage testified at their trial in January 1994 that they had been victims of brutal torture. Medical examinations ordered by the court confirmed torture in the cases of five. One man, **al-Hassan Ahmad Saleh**, lost an eye due to a blow received during interrogations after his arrest. Other defendants gave statements about how they were beaten with whips and hosepipes while bound hand and foot, sometimes naked.

**Osman Mahmud Ali** testified that he sustained head wounds after having been badly beaten, after which he was subjected to karate beatings. He told of being forced to lay naked on hot iron sheets until his skin burned, and of being forced to lie on spent cartridge cases (bullets) which had been heated by the sun, while a security official stood on his back. Where the cartridge cases had been placed horizontally, he received skin

burns; where they were vertical, he was cut. His testimony continued:

*"then someone came with pins and began pricking my ears and inserting them until my ears were full of pins...after that they told me to take the pins out of my ears and to put them back into a box..."*

The government does not appear to have taken any action to bring the perpetrators of this torture to justice, despite confirmation of torture by medical examinations ordered by the court.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Outside the war zones - where massive human rights abuses are still occurring - other serious human rights violations are routine. Political repression continues in Sudan. Suspected political opposition leads to incommunicado detention. The claim that torture is not tolerated is hollow. Despite severe criticisms by the international community about its appalling human rights record, the Government of Sudan continues to evade its responsibilities to protect human rights throughout the country. It flouts international human rights standards and appears to ignore criticisms and demands for change.

Amnesty International is again now calling for the Government of Sudan to put an end to the use of detention without charge or trial in secret detention centres. It is calling for all political detainees to be released without delay unless they are to be charged with a recognizably criminal offence and brought promptly to a fair trial, in line with international standards.

Amnesty International is also calling on the Government of Sudan to demonstrate opposition to torture by taking every measure possible to stop the use of torture and ill-treatment of detainees, including investigating all reports of such abuse and in bringing to justice those responsible.