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AI INDEX: EUR 46/7/97

**EMBARGOED FOR 11:00 HRS GMT THURSDAY 3 APRIL 1997**

## **TORTURE IN RUSSIA - "THIS MAN-MADE HELL"**

You are at home alone and a policeman rings the bell. What do you do?

If you lived in Moscow, you might be among the 43 per cent of the population who say they would not open the door to the police under any circumstances, or the 37 per cent that confess to fear them as much as the criminals<sup>1</sup>.\* If you also happened to belong to an ethnic minority, your fears would be very well founded.

"Under the guise of fighting crime, the Russian Federation has expanded the powers of security and law enforcement agencies to the detriment of constitutional rights, and members of ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable," Amnesty International said today.

In a new report -- *Torture in Russia, "This man-made hell"* -- the human rights organization denounces the systematic and widespread use of torture and ill-treatment in the Russian Federation, and the role played by new and old legislation which contravenes international human rights standards and facilitates the violation of fundamental rights. The report also describes conditions of detention in Russia as "amounting to torture".

In the words of an inmate of Butyrka Prison, Moscow: "Several times I felt so bad that I prayed to God to let me die. I somehow believe that hell cannot be as terrible as this man-made one. God, after all, is merciful, unlike people..."

According to reports, prisoners die from overcrowding, lack of oxygen and poor prison conditions. Cases of death from lack of oxygen have taken place in almost all large pre-trial detention centres in Russia.

In July 1995, for instance, 11 prisoners died of heat-stroke in an overcrowded prison in Novokuznetsk, Kemerovo region. Up to 25 people were being held in cells meant for 10, and the air temperature rose as high as 48° to 51° C. An attempted mass suicide had occurred at the jail in the previous year in response to fierce beatings taking place there.

The Russian Federation is a party to the Convention against Torture, as well as to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which -- like the Russian Constitution -- clearly prohibit the use of torture and ill-treatment. Nevertheless, according to Amnesty International there is a pattern of ill-treatment of detainees in Russia, especially if they belong to ethnic minorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Opinion poll conducted by the sociological centre "Status", *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 15 March 1996

"Chechens and people from the Caucasus, for instance, are particularly vulnerable while in police custody," Amnesty International said.

Torture methods used by the police include asphyxiation, known in Russian as *slonik* ("elephant"), beatings and special methods of physical restraint, known as *lastochka* ("swallow"). In most cases, approaches to the authorities regarding the use of these methods by police have met with little success.

Torture in the Russian Federation is not limited to the security forces, however. In some documented cases, medical personnel have cooperated in human rights violations by refusing to register the wounds of victims and, according to reports, medical staff in some penitentiary institutions directly participate in the torture and ill-treatment of inmates.

"Doctors and medical personnel sometimes allegedly warn the prison administration that a particular prisoner should not be beaten on the head because he suffers from a cranial trauma. In other incidents, doctors are said to have regularly checked the pulse of the victim during the ill-treatment in order to find out whether he could bear more beatings," Amnesty International said.

The report also documents the persistence of old GULAG prison conditions and practices -- like entrusting prisoners to control and ill-treat other inmates -- which are still common in a number of Russian prisons and detention centres.

The *pressovshchiki*, as the inmates entrusted with that duty are known, are often those charged with or convicted of the most serious crimes. They can freely torture and abuse other prisoners at will, since they are instructed by prison officials to 'deal with' resistant prisoners -- which invariably means the use of torture as a punishment for filing complaints, for being a political prisoner, or to obtain confessions.

"These reports are particularly worrying in that some of those confessions are used as evidence, sometimes leading to the death penalty," Amnesty International said.

The *pressovshchiki*'s efforts are usually rewarded with special privileges, and when a prisoner dies or is seriously injured, prison officials can deny any responsibility and attribute the incident to a jail fight.

"People have died from beatings while in correctional centres or during pre-trial detention without the circumstances being properly investigated," Amnesty International said. "Often, active attempts by prison administrations to block investigations make it impossible to determine the truth, and even in some instances where criminal cases have been opened the officials responsible have never been brought to justice".

The report also documents the use of torture and ill-treatment by both sides of the armed conflict in the Chechen Republic, including the use of electric-shock torture, rape as a form of punishment against residents of villages believed to support the Chechen fighters, hostage-taking and possible extrajudicial executions.

"It is clearly within the power of the Russian authorities to take immediate measures to eliminate these illegal practices," Amnesty International said. "The Russian Federation should establish a National Action Plan for the Eradication of Torture, and -- as a matter of priority -- should criminalize torture as a distinct crime with appropriate punishments under the national law".

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**The researcher who prepared the report is available for interviews in English and Russian.**

