

0001 hrs gmt Wednesday 5 May 1993

TADZHIKISTAN: HIDDEN ABUSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

A human rights tragedy - almost hidden from the rest of the world - has been taking place in remote Tadjikistan, said Amnesty International in a report issued today.

In May 1992, the former Soviet republic plunged into a violent civil war between government forces and the Islamic opposition. The subsequent conflict has left up to 20,000 dead, according to official estimates, and has displaced over 600,000 people, more than a tenth of the population.

Amnesty International's report focuses on appalling human rights violations which have taken place in the country's capital, Dushanbe, since the city was retaken by government forces in December 1992. Equally serious abuses are reported by all sides in the conflict in other areas, but so far these have been largely impossible to confirm.

"As the world's governments ready themselves for the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in June, a human rights tragedy is unfolding in Tadjikistan," said Amnesty International.

Some of the victims have been detained and their bodies later found in the street or in Dushanbe city morgue, many revealing evidence of torture and barbaric methods of killing - some had been partially skinned alive or burned to death. The fate of others remains unknown.

An eyewitness account of conditions in the morgue given to Amnesty International by a medical professional reported that the most common form of torture was the tearing out of fingernails, but other victims had apparently had limbs broken, ears cut off or had been slashed across the face horizontally at eye level, apparently to blind them.

Government forces are reported to have also carried out on-the-spot executions. Recent statements by security officials indicate that security forces have been authorized to carry out summary executions.

The killings, torture and "disappearances" are allegedly the work of forces of the Interior Ministry and the People's Front of Tadjikistan, a paramilitary group which took the leading role in the assault on Dushanbe in December. The group - led by a convicted criminal who has spent a total of 23 years in prison for offences including murder - has since been seconded to law enforcement duties.

In an incident in January this year, people believed to be members of the People's Front detained 14 men at a state farm north of Dushanbe. The corpses of 10 of the men were delivered to the city morgue a few days later, many showing signs of torture and mutilation; one of the victims, a school teacher, had apparently been killed by having the top of his skull sliced off. The fate of the other four men remains unknown.

Those targeted for human rights abuses appear to include people from areas of Tadjikistan thought by government supporters to be centres of opposition - the Garm region east of Dushanbe and the Gorno-Badakhstan Autonomous Region in the far east of Tadjikistan.

In an incident in December 1992, armed men in the uniform of the Ministry of Internal Affairs reportedly stopped buses and separated Tadjik citizens whose place of birth was listed in their internal passports as being the Garm or Gorno-Badakhstan regions. Twenty people were ordered to move to military vehicles and when they refused they were shot dead.

In its 14-page report, Amnesty International puts forward a number of recommendations to the government of Tadjikistan to tackle human rights abuse, including urgent investigations into all allegations of extrajudicial killing and torture and a strengthening of the security forces' chain-of-command in order to prevent human rights abuses from taking place. The organization also recommends that paramilitary forces operating outside the chain of command but with official support or acquiescence should be banned.

"A state of war cannot be an excuse for human rights violations - governments have a responsibility to protect the human rights of their citizens, not abuse them," said Amnesty International.

"The government of Tadjikistan recently stated that it recognizes the Charter of the United Nations - it must back these words with concrete action."

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT WEDNESDAY 5 MAY