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MOROCCO: @TORTURE AND UNFAIR TRIALS MARK OF
30 YEARS OF REPRESSION

Amnesty International said today (Wednesday 27 March) that reports of torture and blatantly unfair trials of rioters and anti-war demonstrators in Morocco since December were in line with a pattern of repression in the country stretching back for at least 30 years.

"Early this year, a judge refused even to look into reports that police had tortured people," Amnesty International said, "even though eight of them were so badly injured they had to come from the prison infirmary for their trials."

In recent trials of political offenders, the courts have continued to act from the start as if the defendants were guilty, refusing to allow them even to call witnesses. In one case, 52 people arrested during riots in December were sentenced to up to seven years in prison after the court spent less than 30 seconds each questioning them.

"This short circuit of justice and abuse of prisoners comes as no surprise in Morocco," Amnesty International said. "This is how the government has dealt with its opponents for more than three decades."

In a new report released today, the organization documents the hundreds of people who have been unjustly imprisoned, often after being tortured or unfairly tried, or who have simply "disappeared" at the hands of the government during that time.

Political opponents are often caught in a net of laws so vague - like "offending internal security" - that just criticizing the government can lead to years in prison.

In 1982, a poet was sentenced to 15 years in prison after publishing poems about social injustice and political oppression in the Middle East. One poem was said to have insulted the King.

"Until the laws are changed, there is virtually no chance that people facing political charges will get a fair trial in Morocco," Amnesty International said.

More than 650 political prisoners are now behind bars - some under sentence of death - often after being tortured into making confessions.

The fact that people can be sentenced to up to five years in prison based on nothing but an uncorroborated confession seems to have invited security forces to torture detainees into confessing.

Such laws - along with the practice of keeping detainees in incommunicado detention for interrogation sometimes for weeks before their trial - make torture and ill-treatment a matter of routine in many police stations and detention centres.

Prisoners have their heads immersed in buckets of urine, are given electric shocks, and are suspended in contorted positions in torture methods called the "aeroplane" or the "parrot".

One victim tortured in a police station said "torture here was savage, brutal and arbitrary ... just for vengeance and repression."

More than 60 prisoners convicted of involvement in coup attempts in the early 1970s have been forced to endure exceptionally cruel treatment over the years. Over half of them were sentenced to less than five years in jail, yet have spent more than 17 years completely cut off from family and the outside world. Twenty-nine have reportedly died as a result.

"Harsh prison conditions and the brutality of guards have driven many prisoners to protest through hunger-strikes," Amnesty International said.

Hundreds of people have also "disappeared" over the past 15 years in Morocco and the Western Sahara. The Western Saharans who "disappeared" were suspected of opposing Moroccan rule over the territory and supporting the Polisario Front organization. In Morocco, the "disappeared" include government opponents and their families. Many of these people are still believed to be alive in secret detention centres.

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