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TUNISIA: HUMAN RIGHTS WIDELY VIOLATED

DESPITE GOVERNMENT RHETORIC

There is now a yawning chasm in Tunisia, between what the government appears to be doing for human rights - and the reality of serious and systematic human rights violations, says Amnesty International.

The human rights organization is today launching a new report on Tunisia, in a bid to cut through the government's rhetoric and change the reality of human rights violations - a reality that has seen thousands of people arbitrarily arrested, held in illegal incommunicado detention and tortured in the last three years.

Said Amnesty International: "There have been too many fine words and powerless human rights institutions. What is needed is real action - action that will actually stop human rights violations, instead of being no more than a public relations exercise for the government."

In its report, Amnesty International lists the apparent improvements made by the Tunisian government - and then points out that in reality, nothing has changed. Several human rights watchdogs have been set up, including a Higher Committee for Human Rights, two Commissions of Inquiry, a Special Presidential Adviser, a human rights ombudsman and human rights units within government ministries - but, says Amnesty International, all are characterised by lack of independence, powerlessness and secrecy. Seldom, if ever, does any part of this massive human rights bureaucracy prevent human rights abuse.

And while the government insists that these bodies are doing their job, in reality the bureaucracy serves only to mask the reality that nothing is being done. According to the government, if individual cases are raised with them, they will be dealt with quickly. In reality, Amnesty International has repeatedly raised cases with all sides of the human rights bureaucracy, with little success.

In one case in July last year, Samir Moussa, a student returning to Tunisia after studying abroad, was arrested at Tunis airport. While he was being held in illegal incommunicado detention, his family and Amnesty International appealed to the Higher Committee, the ombudsman, the presidential adviser and the director of political affairs at the Ministry of the Interior - all to no avail. Three times, Amnesty International called on its members around the world to take urgent action on Samir Moussa's behalf. He spent almost two months behind bars, before he was eventually released - without ever being charged - in September.

Initially, those targeted for human rights violations were supporters of unauthorized opposition groups like the Islamic organization al-Nahda or the leftist Parti Communiste des ouvriers de Tunisie. But now, says Amnesty International, the circle of repression is widening to include relatives, sympathisers and friends of government critics - even people who have given financial assistance to families left without a breadwinner have been imprisoned.

Lawyers and journalists have been harassed, women wearing the Islamic veil, the hijab, have been refused work at government offices, refused permission to visit imprisoned relatives - even refused medical treatment. One of the oldest human rights organizations in the Arab World, the Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme, was closed down by the government.

The judicial system, too, must take some of the blame for the recurring violations, says Amnesty International. Time after time, evidence of torture has not been pursued by judges, cases have been held up interminably and procureurs, whose responsibility it is to see that torture claims are investigated, have accepted forged arrest dates and ignored evidence of the police breaking the law.

Said Amnesty International: "Human rights violations are still systematic and brutal in Tunisia - and the government is still doing nothing about it. There is an institutionalised problem - and the government's high-profile human rights bureaucracy is doing nothing to tackle it.

"We have had endless dialogue with the government and seen them deny, cover up and justify the human rights problems. Now we have just one more thing to say - end human rights violations, immediately, urgently."

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