

0001 HRS GMT THURSDAY 20 JUNE 1991

AI Index: MDE 30/19/91
Distr: SC/PO

ETUNISIA:
@TORTURE AND DETENTIONS ESCALATE
IN CRACKDOWN ON OPPOSITION

The Tunisian government's recent crackdown on the Islamic opposition has led to widespread incommunicado detentions and escalating torture, Amnesty International said today (Thursday 20 June).

The human rights organization said hundreds of Islamists and others have been picked up by the police over the last eight months, sometimes taken from their homes in violent arrests, and kept in police stations in incommunicado detention for weeks on end.

"Many of these people have been tortured while they were completely cut off from the outside world," Amnesty International said. "Several people say that they were even tortured within the headquarters of the Ministry of the Interior itself."

Last month, Amnesty International visited Tunisia to raise the deteriorating human rights situation directly with the government and presented officials with a list of more than 70 people who were then still in incommunicado detention past the maximum 10-day legal limit. The government has said it would respond to those concerns.

The organization has also written to the government asking for more information about the circumstances in which two political detainees died in custody in April and May.

In the last two months at least 300 alleged members of an Islamic group have been arrested, with many being held behind bars for weeks without being able to see their families or lawyers.

Amnesty International has also spoken to dozens of people who had spent weeks being shunted from one government office to another in their attempts to find out where their relatives were being detained.

Under Tunisian law, detainees can be held for up to 10 days in garde à vue detention, but in recent months Islamic opponents have often had their detention extended indefinitely.

During the week-long visit to Tunisia in May, the Amnesty International delegates talked to two lawyers who had been held in garde à vue detention for around three weeks. One alleged that he had been held with a student who had been so badly tortured he could only move by crawling on his hands and knees.

One man arrested at the beginning of April was held for nearly two months before the authorities would allow his lawyers to see him. During that time, he was apparently tortured by the "poulet roti" (roast chicken) method, where detainees are suspended upside down with their limbs tied in contorted positions.

Other detainees have said they were beaten on the soles of their feet, burned with cigarettes, given electric shocks or sexually abused with sticks or bottles.

Amnesty International said it has received more than 100 allegations of torture of political detainees, mostly members or suspected members of Hizb al-Nahda, the main Islamic opposition group. The torture is apparently aimed at getting information about the Hizb al-Nahda, particularly details about its members and sympathizers.

Amnesty International said the government has denied the widespread abuses, although it has acknowledged that sporadic assaults have taken place.

"These abuses are not isolated -- they are part of a pattern," the organization said, "a pattern that the government must investigate now."

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT THURSDAY 20 JUNE 1981