

# LEBANON

## "Where is the door?"

### Letter from an Amnesty International delegation visiting Khiam detention centre in South Lebanon

Amnesty International sent a delegation to Lebanon on 27 May to carry out research into human rights concerns in south Lebanon before and after the withdrawal of Israeli forces from its self-styled "security zone" and the collapse of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), Israel=s proxy militia in South Lebanon. On 29 May, together with former detainees, they visited Khiam detention centre, where hundreds of Lebanese nationals have been detained over the years without charge or trial. All remaining 144 prisoners were released on 23 May.

The following open letter was sent by the Amnesty International delegates who included two staff members of the International Secretariat and members of Amnesty International=s Tunisian and Norwegian Sections.

Dear Friends,

We arrived at the Khiam detention centre, on a wind-swept hill overlooking the town of Khiam with a beautiful view of the surrounding fields and mountains of southern Lebanon, in the early afternoon of 29 May. We drove there with a number of former detainees we had visited in the morning in their homes in the villages of Rmeish and Ainata.

Only six days before our visit, this was still a frightening detention centre, with its tales of torture, degradation and hopelessness. The stories we had just heard in the morning from detainees most recently arrested and freed on 23 May did not differ significantly from those we had become familiar with over the years. Filthy hoods, relentless interrogation through beatings, repeated suspension from an electricity pylon, dousing with water, and electroshocks - one recent addition seems to have been a lie-detector machine. Only a few months ago detainees were sometimes still taken to Israel first for interrogation and then to Khiam, or taken to Israel from Khiam and back. Detention in crowded, dark and dirty cells followed interrogation. The waiting started, with minimal exposure to daylight, bad food and rare contact with the outside world - and this only in recent years.

Worst of all, there was the fear for their relatives who were often detained and abused as a way of putting pressure on the detainees. Detainees also suffered from the knowledge that they were being held as hostage as part of the trade in human beings or their remains in which Israel, *Hizbullah* and others have engaged, a situation which continues to this day - only yesterday the Israeli Supreme Court was hearing the case of two prominent Lebanese detainees held in Israel openly as "bargaining chips" to find out the fate of Israeli soldiers missing in Lebanon.

Then, all of a sudden, around mid-day on 23 May, there was the dramatic liberation. No jailers showed up with the keys to the cells, they actually ran away from the prison to join other SLA members streaming to the border to seek refuge in Israel, as Israeli troops rushed themselves to the border. In a scene almost from another age, we were told that the people of Khiam, acting out of the momentum created by the hurried and confused Israeli withdrawal, went to the detention centre demanding the liberation of the prisoners. The SLA jailers negotiated a safe passage for themselves out of the prison and left, leaving much behind, and no one was hurt. Detainees heard shouting, some shooting (it was in the air), and did not know what was happening. Some feared that people were being executed:

*"We got close to the window in our cell to try to hear better as we did not understand what was happening. There was shouting and we heard shooting. Then we saw a boy out of the window. He said 'where is the door'? We knew then we were free".*

Using any tools they could find, the people from Khiam broke down the doors letting the detainees out, in the chaotic and exciting scenes that were captured on television. All 144 remaining detainees came out, many left their few belongings behind. For the first time, they could also see without terror the places and some of the instruments of torture that the SLA abandoned in their panicky flight. Former prisoners accompanied us, as we saw the filthy hoods, many made of thick blue material, scattered around. We also saw a metal grid, roughly built on the face of a wall, in what we were told was the main interrogation room - at the foot one of the watchtowers, this was also reminiscent of another age. Prisoners Ni=ma Daqduq and De Gaulle Butros showed us how they were tied to the grid and beaten. This is where the electroshock machine was apparently kept, although, perhaps not surprisingly, it is no longer there.

They also took us to the electricity pylon placed in a small enclosed courtyard, where so many were tied up, stripped to their underwear and with a hood over their heads, and beaten or doused with water. As the former prisoners related this experience to us standing next to the pylon, other visitors gathered around to listen, many clearly moved. The prisoners themselves were being affected, as we saw in the case of Najwa Semhat, who was returning for the first time after her release six days before, with her daughter and husband - himself a former detainee - especially when she faced her cell with memories all too fresh. But they were all incredibly brave, patiently telling us what had happened to them, and often repeating it to journalists and others from among the hundreds, possibly thousands, of people coming to see the detention centre.

For the former Khiam detainees, it must be difficult to realize that they are actually free, that the nightmare of Khiam is over. It was all so sudden. Muhammad Jamil found among the clothes, food and other things scattered around in his former cell, a piece of embroidery he had made; De Gaulle Butros picked up a drawing on a paper tissue: small but significant things that became important in their prisoner lives.

It was an extraordinary and moving day, full of incongruous sights and strong, mixed emotions. On the one hand, a festive atmosphere, with kids waving flags - primarily those of *Hizbullah* and *Amal* - playing in the wreck of a military vehicle abandoned in the central courtyard and enjoying refreshments from vendors at the gate of the centre. On the other hand former prisoners, sometimes with their families and sometimes alone, telling their stories, bumping into each other, recognizing and embracing each other in highly emotional scenes, often fighting back the tears. And occasionally the sight of Lebanese government, religious and party officials, also in the melée.

With the traces of its terrible past still fresh, Khiam is at the same time already well into history. The feelings we felt and shared with others were a sense of relief, even celebration, as something terrible was over for good. At the same time we knew that the euphoria will not last, that in the next weeks and months prisoners will have to restart their lives away from the limelight, facing health problems, economic and other difficulties. A chapter is closing, but another one has immediately opened, more intimate, more difficult for the prisoners and their families. Amnesty International will continue to help.

International solidarity will be essential to provide a minimum of practical as well as psychological support to the victims of Khiam. We have seen how solidarity does have an effect as prisoners learned, some for the first time, that people from different countries, including countries they associate with their former tormentors, had actually been campaigning for years on their behalf and are ready to continue to help.

For us, it felt that this is what Amnesty International is really about. We showed copies of our actions and reports, from the first Urgent Action of November 1985, to the main report of 1992, to the last Urgent Action issued only one week before the prisoners were freed. We had with us some of the hundreds of letters we received from the Israeli authorities saying they could not deliver them to the SLA or that in any case they had nothing to do with the detention centre. No letters were ever received by the detainees and they did not know that Amnesty International members and others around the world were working for them.

Towards the end of our visit, we gave the former prisoners a letter that was sent via Israel to the Commander of the SLA by an Urgent Action group from Cornell University in the United States of America in November 1985. It was returned to the group by the Israeli authorities saying they could not deliver it, a fiction that was to be repeated in the following years. Now Amnesty International delegates had brought the still-sealed letter to Khiam, and the prisoners opened it under the barbed wire of the exercise yard. One of them, Muhammad Jamil, read it out in English. It was an appeal for protection against torture and arbitrary detention. Another prisoner we encountered turned out to be one of those whose photographs were featured on the cover of our 1992 report on Khiam. He clutched his copy thankfully while

we inquired about how he was doing and took his current address. Amnesty International will stay in touch.

Beyond the reality of the prisoners, there is that of the former jailers and their masters. The crimes committed in Khiam were of the most serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law - in short, war crimes. Hundreds of SLA members have been arrested, perhaps including some who were involved in the crimes of Khiam. While Lebanon is entitled to exercise leniency or even pardon them for their taking up arms on the side of Israel, there should be no blanket amnesty for any serious abuses they have committed. For torture and other serious abuses they should be brought to justice in fair trials without the death penalty.

Together with the responsibility of the SLA, there is the responsibility of the state of Israel, which is fully accountable for the arbitrary detention, torture and other abuses committed in Khiam. Repeated denials of this never rang true and sometimes seemed more of an attempt to dissociate Israel from the worst excesses officials knew were being committed in Khiam.

Last year Israel admitted, in a High Court case to which Amnesty International's information had contributed, that Israel paid and trained the SLA guards, and even that their personnel assisted with polygraph tests. Najwa Semhat told us that only this January she was taken to Israel for interrogation for a few hours and then returned to Khiam. Of course the fate of the Israeli soldiers missing in Lebanon must be clarified, and those responsible for any abuses committed against them must also be held to account (one of the soldiers, Ron Arad, appears to have been held for up to a year by a Lebanese militia before "disappearing"). But this does not provide Israel with any justification to commit abuses.

One thing is clear, among the rapid and complex changes witnessed in South Lebanon in recent days: that much of the work begins now, for members of Amnesty International as well as for others who care about human rights, regardless of borders.