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Mauritania: Government guilty of routine torture

Amnesty International today accused the Mauritanian government of routine and systematic torture, saying that the security apparatus has adopted torture as the preferred method of investigation and repression.

“Torture is used against all categories of prisoners in Mauritania – whether they are suspected Islamists, soldiers accused of involvement in a coup, or those detained for simple ordinary crimes,” said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty International’s Mauritania researcher who conducted investigations in the country.

In the scathing report published today, Amnesty International details the methods of torture and lists the exact locations of some torture centres and exposes the involvement of Moroccan agents.

“Amnesty International has gathered numerous statements from victims of torture that gives precise information about the people who tortured them -- including their names, ranks, and functions,” said Gaëtan Mootoo.

Testimony gathered by Amnesty International from the prisoners describes similar torture techniques. None of the acts have been investigated or their perpetrators brought to justice.

Places where torture has been carried out include: the first police brigade (opposite the World Health Organization building), the police school in Nouakchott, gendarmerie barracks, the headquarters of the Army Chief of Staff, and Navy premises.

The presence of Moroccan agents in Mauritania was also questioned by Amnesty International.

“Testimony we gathered clearly indicates that Moroccan agents are directly involved in interrogation and torture in Mauritania,” said Gaëtan Mootoo.

One prisoner told Amnesty International that Moroccan agents were even more violent than their Mauritanian colleagues:

“After the third night, at about 10.00 in the evening, some Moroccans came to interrogate me. They wanted me to confess to belonging to the ‘Salafist’ group and that I was in favour of Jihad... They said that if I didn’t confess, it would cost me my life. They said that what the Mauritians had done to me so far would be like heaven compared to what they would do to me.... They used the same methods, including the ‘jaguar’. They were worse than the Mauritians, who would stop from time to time, and sometimes the Mauritanian guards would smuggle some water to you. With the Moroccans, though, there was no let-up.”

Amnesty International has been unable to ascertain the legal basis for the presence of Moroccan security forces in Mauritania.

Prison conditions themselves also often amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Amnesty International representatives visiting the Dar Naïm prison earlier this year were greeted with the unbelievable spectacle of dozens of men pressed up against each other in one cell in the stifling heat. They are unable to leave their cells or breathe fresh air, often for months or even years at a time.

“In some prisons, we could not even get into the cells due to the excessive number of inmates,” said Gaëtan Mootoo. “The stench of these cells, which were infested with vermin and ridden with fleas, was indescribable.”

Threats were made to prisoners prior to one Amnesty International visit. One prisoner said: “When they told us about Amnesty International’s visit, the guards threatened us. They said that we could say whatever we liked, but that we would regret it, because the Amnesty people would be leaving, but we prisoners would be staying there with them.”

Police, prosecutors, judges – all invariably regard evidence extracted under torture as perfectly admissible and use these “confessions” to convict defendants – often without having any other material proof.

“Torturers can carry out their abuse safe in the knowledge that the judicial system will turn a blind eye,” said Gaëtan Mootoo. “It is an abomination of justice.”

Torture methods:

Acts of torture such as those below are repeated successively until detainees “confess”. The acts are normally conducted at night and accompanied by a “ritual”.

- “Jaguar”: the hands and feet are tied together and the person is suspended from an iron bar while being hit and tortured
- Cigarette burns
- Electric shocks: administered to different parts of the body
- Sexual violence
- Pulling out of hair: especially used with suspected Islamists; hair from beard, armpits and genitals is pulled out
- Sharp tools: Amnesty International heard at least one account in which a metal saw was used to torture a detainee.

Notes to editors:

- Since 2005, Mauritania has suffered two military coups. The most recent one, in August 2008, resulted in the detention of the president and prime minister. The president remains under house arrest while the prime minister has been transferred to a prison near Nouakchott
- The new military government said it would organize free and transparent elections “within the shortest time possible”. Elections have yet to be scheduled.
- The African Union has suspended Mauritania’s membership and a number of states, including France and the US, have frozen their non-humanitarian aid to the country.
- Several peaceful demonstrations have taken place in Mauritania demanding the release of the president and a restoration of constitutional order. Several were forcibly broken up in early October 2008. The repression followed the 30 September decision by the governor of Nouakchott to suspend “all demonstrations of a political nature in public places, until further notice.”