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Sudan: Preliminary conclusions of Amnesty International's mission

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Amnesty International delegates visiting the Sudan in the first official mission allowed for 13 years welcomed the growing openness in the country, but expressed concern at continuing arbitrary and incommunicado detention, unfair trials as well as the forced recruitment of children and displacement of civilians by all sides in the armed conflict.

"Detaining students, community leaders or political opponents in incommunicado detention for periods of up to nine months and then releasing them without charge or trial is a violation of basic human rights," said Andrew Anderson, Africa Program Director and head of the delegation.

Amnesty International is calling on the Government to repeal the sections of the National Security Act (NSA) which allow such detentions without judicial oversight and provide immunity for security officers. Amnesty International met several victims who were tortured during such incommunicado detentions.

During a visit to Darfur, the delegates also expressed concern about the lack of fair trial provisions in the special courts and civilians killed in what are described as "tribal clashes".

"The Sudanese government should intensify efforts to involve the different community leaders in a reconciliation process," Amnesty International said.

During the visit, the Sudanese government facilitated a wide range of meetings with Ministers, officials, individuals and organizations in Khartoum and Darfur.

"We have welcomed the opportunity to engage in open and constructive dialogue about human rights issues with the Sudanese government and we hope that this signals a commitment to taking practical steps to reduce human rights violations," Amnesty International said.

In meetings with the Government and human rights organizations as well as international agencies, Amnesty International delegates stressed the importance of including concrete mechanisms to strengthen human rights monitoring and protection as part of the peace process.

Delegates visited Shala prison in Darfur and met with prisoners under sentence of death. "One man we talked to said his trial only lasted one hour; another said he had been tried and sentenced to death without having a lawyer," Andrew Anderson said.. "In such cases, where the death penalty is provided for, it is vital that basic fair trial standards are respected."

Other concerns raised by Amnesty International include:

Freedom of the press and association. Amnesty International acknowledges some recent improvements such as the ending of pre-publication censorship. However, although the Press Act of 1999 set up a National Press Council to regulate the Press, security officials continue to lay down "red lines" of what newspapers may and may not publish. The editor of the newspaper *al-Watan* only heard on radio on 28 December 2002 that his newspaper had been suspended ; a month later, the newspaper remains closed. A number of meetings by political parties and other groups have been banned.

"It is vital that freedom of expression is guaranteed, especially now in the context of the peace process," Amnesty International stressed.

Forced recruitment of child soldiers, mostly by southern militias allied to the Government of Sudan, has continued in recent weeks in the areas around Bentiu. Amnesty International also received reports of youths picked up in Khartoum since 23 December for apparent recruitment into the armed forces without any opportunity to notify their families.

Internally displaced persons (IDP). Amnesty International visited a number of IDP camps around Khartoum and raised with the Government their urgent humanitarian needs. They also discussed what steps were being taken to prepare for voluntary return in the context of the peace process.

Delegates met the Vice Chancellor of the University of Khartoum and expressed concern at the failure to publish the report of a Commission of Inquiry set up by the Ministry of Interior into the excessive use of force by the police against students of the University.

"In Khartoum, Bahr al-Ghazal and El Fasher universities, students were held in incommunicado detention for up to two months . Some were severely beaten in offices of the National security. Then scores were dismissed in processes which were arbitrary and lacked transparency." Amnesty International welcomed a commitment from the Wali of Darfur to set up a process to review the dismissals at El Fasher University.

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