

## **Americas: UN Day for the victims of torture -- a day for remembrance, a day for action**

*Three young men in police custody are beaten up with rifle butts and clubs to be made to confess to a crime. One of them has a plastic bag placed over his head and has his left wrist burnt, apparently with a cigarette lighter. Their claim of having been tortured is later dismissed and excluded from their case file.*

*This happened in the Mexican state of Chiapas last month, but similar cases are still a sad occurrence in some 22 countries across the Americas, Amnesty International said today on the UN Day in support of the victims of torture.*

*"On this day, we are calling on all governments in the Americas to take firm and immediate action to put an end to torture," the organization added.*

*"People in many countries tend to believe that torture is a problem of the past, associated with politically-motivated persecutions under military governments. However, men, women and children continue to be tortured and ill-treated for a variety of purposes all over the American continent."*

*In prisons throughout the region, from Brazil to Mexico to Venezuela, torture is used as a means to control and humiliate inmates.*

*In a number of countries, including Argentina and Ecuador, it is used against those whose sexual identity appears to threaten social order, such as gays, lesbians, transsexuals and transvestites.*

In Colombia, torture -- often involving mutilation -- remains widespread, particularly as a prelude to killings by army-backed paramilitary forces of those they accuse of being guerrilla sympathizers or collaborators.

In Jamaica, beatings and ill-treatment form part of a wider pattern of police brutality, often culminating in unlawful killings. An example of this was the death of Richard Williams, who was shot dead at his work place on 8 June by the same police officers who had allegedly beaten him for one hour. He had no previous criminal record, nor was he wanted on any charges.

"Torture, beatings and other forms of ill-treatment are routinely used against criminal suspects to extract confessions, and they have too often become a *de facto* replacement for scientific investigation techniques," Amnesty International stressed.

In a briefing on Brazil to the United Nations Committee Against Torture in May this year, Amnesty International highlighted a series of such cases, including that of Wander Cosme Cavalhero, arrested in February 2001 for possession of a cannabis cigarette and forced under torture to sign a confession implicating him in a robbery. He reported being kicked, punched, beaten on the soles of his feet with truncheons and then covered with a wet cloth and given electric shocks all over his body.

This year, Amnesty International also submitted to the UN Committee against Torture its concerns on Bolivia, where torture and ill-treatment at the hands of the security forces are widely reported and the authorities appear to be taking little or no action to stop them.

"Government inaction in the face of widespread reports of torture is a region-wide problem, leading to those responsible rarely being brought to justice and feeding a vicious cycle of impunity and more abuses," Amnesty International said.

Victims of torture, their families and human rights activists working on their behalf are often subjected to threats and intimidation, to dissuade them from seeking justice. In what appears to be a pattern common to various countries in the region, members of the Peruvian police harassed and threatened the family and lawyer of Jenard Lee Rivera San Roque -- tortured and killed in police custody in May 2001 -- as well as some neighbours who had been protesting against his killing.

"The prevalence of impunity means that victims and their families are still waiting for justice a long time -- sometimes even decades -- after the torture," the organization added. "This is the case for example with thousands of people who suffered torture under the military governments of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and during counter-insurgency operations in El Salvador, Guatemala and Peru."

In Chile, torture survivors from the military government of general Pinochet -- whose cases were not included in the report by Chile's Truth and Reconciliation Commission -- are launching an initiative to have the violations against them recognised and to obtain redress.

"Finally, we must not forget another group of victims who have been suffering ongoing torture often for years: the families of the 'disappeared', whose severe and protracted suffering has been internationally recognised as a form of torture," Amnesty International said.

*"Individuals and organizations in countries as diverse as Argentina and Mexico, Guatemala and Uruguay, Chile and El Salvador, Honduras and Peru are carrying on their struggle to find truth and justice in the case of their loved ones -- often at great risks for themselves," the organization added, making reference to the torture recently suffered by Alejandra Bonafini in what appears to be an attack linked to her mother's work on behalf of the Argentinian "disappeared".*

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>