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Syria: Time to break with legacy of torture and dehumanization

"The Syrian authorities should initiate an irreversible break with the heavy legacy of human rights violations, starting by an immediate and unconditional release of all recently detained prisoners of conscience," Amnesty International said today. Among these are the leading opposition figure Riad al-Turk, independent members of parliament Riad Seif and Mamun al-Humsi and other activists in civil society forums and human rights groups, including the economist 'Aref Dalilah, a leading member of the Civil Society Forum, and Kamal al-Labwani, a member of the council of the Committees for the Defence of Human Rights in Syria. The organization calls also for the release of all prisoners held solely for the peaceful expression of their political views, and the release of hundreds of other political prisoners unless they are given prompt fair trials.

The organization noted media reports of the transfer in July and August of around 500 prisoners from Tadmur Military Prison. "We would welcome the transfer as a first step towards redressing all violations inflicted on the prisoners over the years," said Amnesty International. "However reports of the transfer could not be confirmed by the authorities despite repeated requests by the organization."

In a report published today -- Syria - Tadmur Military Prison: torture, despair and dehumanization -- Amnesty International paints a grim picture of an anachronistic penitentiary institution so notorious for its culture of dehumanizing torture and ill-treatment that it is referred to in Syria as the place where "the person who enters is lost and the one who leaves is born." Among the thousands detained over the years many have frequently been tortured while held in total isolation from the outside world for months or years without charge or trial. Many thousands of families have been kept in the dark about the fate of their relatives. Some, whose loved ones "disappeared" after arrest, fear the worst.

"Every aspect of life in Tadmur Prison is a dehumanizing experience," said Amnesty International. "The level of brutality endured by prisoners in this prison is shocking. It is hard to believe that such torture and ill-treatment can still take place nowadays."

The report stresses that the safeguards against torture and ill-treatment contained in the Syrian Constitution and Penal Code are only theoretical. Despite "repeated and consistent allegations of torture, Amnesty International is not aware of any cases where Syrian laws against torture have actually been implemented," the organization said.

Torture is so routine that detainees are commonly tortured as soon as they arrive in Tadmur, in what is known as the "haflat al-istiqbal" or "reception party." A former detainee held between 1996 and 1999 gave this account of a "reception" at Tadmur: "I was (...) forced into the tyre and ordered to place my hands between my legs; my feet were then stretched and painfully tied with a strong rope to an iron bar to prevent me from moving them in any direction. After that they took the blindfold off my eyes and the lashing started. Two guards were whipping me at the same time (...) Amidst our cries of pain we begin to count the lashes: one, two... Ten, twenty, thirty... then one loses count and concentration. Indeed many people faint."

The report points out that the jailers, especially during the 1980s, seemed to have been given a licence to do anything to certain categories of prisoners, including deliberately killing them. A prisoners' report smuggled out of Syria in 1999 contained this typical account: "... Another means of torture is to force two prisoners to hold an inmate by the hands and feet, rock him high in the air, then fling him away to fall on the ground. When one prisoner refused to do so he was beaten continuously on his head until he lost his mind completely. The poor man turned into a clown, and died one month later. Liquidation by torture was also common in Tadmur. A single blow to the prisoner's head with an iron bar, or a concrete block thrown by a guard stationed on the roof onto the head of prisoners standing in the 'breather' (daily exercise) courtyard, and it is all over."

All aspects of normal prison routine, the exercise period and even personal hygiene, in Tadmur Prison are frequently used to inflict torture or ill-treatment. For example when prisoners are shaved, approximately every three to four weeks, they are beaten while waiting their turn and their faces, particularly their lips, ears and noses, are often slashed with razor blades.

The report notes that the treatment of prisoners in Tadmur Prison seemed to change depending on shifts of emphasis in political situations and the state's policies towards various categories of its political opponents. The 1980s witnessed the most brutal and horrific scenes of torture and the deaths of perhaps hundreds of prisoners, mostly as a result of torture. In the 1990s the treatment of prisoners saw some

improvement, although many inmates have suffered from a high incidence of serious illnesses, such as tuberculosis and cholera.

Amnesty International notes that fewer arrests seemed to have taken place during the last few years, leading to fewer reports of torture and ill-treatment. However, the organization remains concerned that the mechanisms which facilitate human rights violations, as provided under the 1963 Emergency Legislation, including the excessive powers given to the security forces, are still intact, as witnessed by the recent arbitrary arrests of leading opposition figures, human rights activists and members of the emerging civil society groups.

Amnesty International's recommendations to the Syrian authorities include calls for release of all prisoners of conscience; immediate halt of the current wave of arrests of political opponents and activists; bringing the administration of all prisons under proper judicial control; ratification of the Convention against Torture; independent investigations in all cases of torture and ill-treatment; informing the families of those who died in custody or were executed where their relatives were buried and ensuring that victims of torture and prolonged detention without trial be rehabilitated and compensated.

"No political or economic reform in Syria will be possible unless priority is given to human rights protection and promotion," Amnesty International concluded.

For the full report, please see:

<http://www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/recent/MDE240142001?OpenDocument>

RealVideo:

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http://emedia.amnesty.org/Syria_English.ram

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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>