

Asia Pacific: The undercurrent of torture

Amnesty International's global Campaign Against Torture was launched today, beginning with a press conference in Tokyo, Japan. The organization is calling for worldwide action towards the abolition of torture.

Torture and ill-treatment persists as an undercurrent across the Asia Pacific region -- from India and Pakistan to the Philippines, China and Japan. Human rights violators include democratic, as well as repressive governments, the rich and the less developed.

"Torture is prevalent throughout the Asia Pacific. Governments in the region have it in their power to change this and rid the region of this gross act of inhumanity," Amnesty International said.

Torture in police custody is common throughout the region -- inflicted on both criminal suspects and political dissidents. People have died as a result of torture in several Asia Pacific countries including India, Pakistan, Myanmar and China.

Many of the region's governments have failed to take the most basic steps to prevent torture or investigate complaints. Corruption, official acquiescence and a lack of adequate human rights training for law-enforcement officials, means that in many countries torture has become routine practice.

Torture, including beating, electric shocks, hanging by the arms, shackling in painful positions, and sleep and food deprivation, is used throughout China.

It is used extensively against criminal suspects and political dissidents. The victims include members of ethnic minorities, such as Tibetans and Uighurs, and followers of religious or spiritual movements.

In many Asia-Pacific countries there is a clear link between discrimination and torture - those at most risk are the poorest and most marginalised groups in society. They may be ethnic minority groups who face discrimination in society at large, drug users and petty criminals, street children and women.

Women in South Asia are particularly vulnerable to torture by private individuals. Governments continue to fail to investigate patterns of torture including rape in custody, acid attacks and dowry-related murders.

In areas of conflict, including in Sri Lanka, India and Solomon Islands, whole populations are often at risk of torture from both state agents and armed opposition groups.

A climate of impunity runs across the region and affects almost all countries. From South Asia across to the Pacific, torturers act without fear of prosecution. Impunity is fuelled by official complacency, lack of judicial independence and shortcomings in criminal justice systems.

Police in Cambodia are known to be complicit in "mob justice". In 1999 there were at least 19 cases in which criminal suspects were killed by angry bystanders often with police standing by and watching.

There are persistent reports of ill-treatment in Japanese prisons, detention centres, immigration detention centres and police custody. Criminal suspects and migrant workers risk beatings and intimidation during questioning by police and immigration officials.

Many governments have not signed up to the UN Convention against Torture, and those who have often fail to implement its provisions.

During its year-long campaign, Amnesty International will be mobilising its membership in 15 Asia-Pacific countries, and working together with other organizations to change public and official attitudes towards torture. It will be calling on the region's governments to take real steps to prevent torture, and to address impunity and discrimination.

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For more information on Amnesty International global Campaign Against Torture, please phone the press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
or visit web : <http://www.stoptorture.org>