

## Somalia

### UN Troops accused of Torture

#### Pic caption:

Two Belgian soldiers swing a Somali boy over an open fire in 1993. A former paratrooper apparently reported that such behaviour was a regular practice, and that the boy in this case had been threatened with being burned alive. Both soldiers were acquitted of charges of assault and battery and using threats.

Evidence is mounting that United Nations (UN) troops tortured and ill-treated Somali citizens during multinational peace-keeping operations in Somalia. Those most closely implicated in such flagrant human rights abuses were from the Belgian, Canadian and Italian contingents.

In recent disclosures to an Italian magazine, Michele Patruno, a former member of the Italian army, claimed that he witnessed his colleagues torturing and ill-treating Somali prisoners. He alleged that during 1993 Italian forces kept prisoners tied up in the sun and deprived them of food and water, or gave them only spicy food to increase their thirst. If they refused to talk, he said, they were then subjected to blows, cigarette burns on the soles of the feet, and electric shocks to the body -- including to the testicles. Some were thrown against razor wire fences. Patruno alleged that senior officers were always present at such incidents; the article reproduced photographs which Patruno said he had taken at Johar camp, which depicted soldiers apparently preparing to electrocute a young Somali man.

His claims were rapidly followed by further allegations by other former soldiers and Somalis of human rights violations committed by members of the Italian armed forces. The Italian Government launched judicial and administrative investigations into the allegations.

The Italian forces are not alone in facing criticism over their human rights record in Somalia. In May 1996 an officer of the Canadian Airborne Regiment, whose unit was involved in the torture and death of a Somali youth, had his prison sentence increased to three months and was dismissed from the military. A soldier involved in the killing also had his prison sentence increased to one year. The Regiment has since been disbanded.

The Belgian authorities have opened investigations into allegations of torture and ill-treatment of Somali men, women and children by Belgian UN forces in 1993. Several soldiers have been tried by military courts, accused of ill-treating or killing Somalis: most have reportedly been acquitted or received suspended sentences. One officer was sentenced to eight days' suspended imprisonment for subjecting two children to a mock execution.

A common criticism raised in connection with these allegations is the lack of training in humanitarian law received by UN troops. Michele Patruno, for example, said Italian conscripts serving in Somalia had received no such training -- if true, this breaches Italy's obligations under, among other treaties, the Geneva Conventions. An internal investigation by the Belgian authorities has highlighted the need for better training for Belgian soldiers, given the increasingly international context in which they are operating.

In early 1993 AI called on the UN to establish civilian human rights advisers to train UN troops in international human rights standards, and to investigate any violations by UN troops. The UN has not yet accepted that its troops are bound by and should be trained in human rights law and standards.

#### What happened in Somalia?

In December 1992, after the disintegration of the Somali state amid vicious inter-factional fighting, the UN Security Council authorized 'Operation Restore Hope', a US-led multinational

task force, “to establish a secure environment for humanitarian relief operations”. This turned into a UN peace-enforcing and institution-building operation from May 1993. The embattled UN force withdrew in March 1995, having failed to achieve peace and reconciliation between the Somali factions. Human rights are still being abused by various armed Somali factions.

A new AI report suggests ways in which Somalis can develop human rights promotive activities with the support of the international community. [See Putting human rights on the agenda - a human rights training workshop, AI Index: AFR 52/01/97].

## INDIA

In the name of development

Sadhana Bhalekar, a 24-year-old housewife, was three months pregnant when she was arrested on 3 June 1997. She testified: “At around five in the morning, several policemen forcibly entered the house and started beating members of [my] family... the policemen dragged me out of the house..., beating me on my back with batons. My one-and-a-half-year-old daughter held on to me, but the police kicked her away.”

Reports indicate that Sadhana was attacked because her husband, Baba Bhalekar, was a leader of the recent wave of protests against the construction of a power plant by the Dabhol Power Company (DPC) in the Indian state of Maharashtra. Since the beginning of 1997 hundreds of people -- mostly women -- have been subjected to harassment, arbitrary arrest, preventive detention under the ordinary criminal law, and ill-treatment, for their part in these protests. The protest organizers have also been targeted and their freedom of movement curtailed.

The DPC is a joint venture between three US-based multinational corporations, and the protesters have been challenging the project on the grounds of its impact on economic and social rights. Among their claims are that land acquisition has led to the displacement of local people, and that the project is destroying the local environment. The degree of violence used against them by police highlights the extent to which the central and state authorities in India have been prepared to deploy state force in the interests of development projects.

AI has received similar reports from the sites of other protests against industrial and development projects in India, such as the development of the Narmada river, where protesters have been arbitrarily detained, raped and ill-treated over a number of years.

As their country moves into its second half-century of independence, India's citizens have a right to the freedoms of speech, assembly and movement that are guaranteed to them in their Constitution and by the international standards to which India is a party. The Indian Government must act now to turn its stated commitments into reality.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Call on the Government of India and the Government of Maharashtra to ensure that human rights defenders throughout India are able to peacefully protest without fear of ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest, preventive detention or other forms of harassment. Please write to: Mr Murli Manohar Joshi/ Chief Minister of Maharashtra/ Office of the Chief Minister/ Mantralaya/ Mumbai/ Maharashtra/ India; and to Mr Indrajit Gupta/ Minister of Home Affairs/ Ministry of Home Affairs/ North Block, New Delhi 110 001, India.

## LIBYA

A new wave of human rights abuse

In Libya, gross human rights violations are systematic and sanctioned at the highest level, in flagrant violation of the country's obligations under international human rights treaties.

Despite having publicly denounced the human rights abuses of the past at the end of the 1980s, the Head of State, Colonel Mu'ammār al-Gaddafi, has in recent years called not only for the widening of the scope of the death penalty, but also for the implementation of other cruel judicial punishments. Dozens of people have now been executed, some after grossly unfair trials. Several people have “disappeared”. Dozens of government opponents have reportedly been killed, both inside Libya and abroad, in circumstances which suggest they may have been extra-judicially executed. Hundreds of people have been arbitrarily arrested and scores of political detainees are held without charge or trial; they include Rashid ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Urfia who has been held since 1982. Others who have been acquitted by courts remain in detention. Trials in Libya consistently fall far short of international fair trial standards.

Political detainees are routinely tortured, both physically and psycho-logically, during interrogation. Confessions extracted under torture are used to convict them -- yet to date, no investigations into allegations of torture have ever been reported. The families and tribes of suspected government opponents are punished for the political activities of their relations; some have been taken hostage by the security forces to make their “targets” give themselves up. It is clear that Libya is renegeing on its commitments under international human rights treaties. AI is calling on the Libyan Government to take immediate steps to end human rights violations in the country.

For further information, please see Libya: Gross human rights violations amid secrecy and isolation (AI Index: MDE 19/08/97).

See page 8 for appeal case

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE)

There has been a significant rise in the reported number of floggings in the UAE. Many of those convicted are migrant workers, often from southern Asia, who are charged with offences such as having sexual relations outside marriage, and sentenced to flogging, imprisonment and deportation. In the Emirate of Ra's al-Khaimah, where flogging has been extended to crimes such as begging and speeding, reports suggest that at least some victims of flogging are immediately stripped and lashed in the courtroom.

### MEXICO

Hilario Mesino Acosta, a Mexican peasant leader, was unconditionally released in June 1997. He had been held for a year without charge or trial, during which time he was tortured and his relatives were harassed and threatened. AI considered him a prisoner of conscience.

His release followed a national and international campaign on behalf of all those suffering human rights violations in Guerrero state. While AI welcomes his release, it is concerned that no investigation has yet been launched to bring to justice those responsible for his torture or for the threats against him and his family.

### HONDURAS

In May the Honduran First Court of Appeals confirmed a sentence of six years' imprisonment on two members of the Honduras Army battalion, who, in 1994, raped an 11-year-old girl. This conviction sets a welcome precedent for human rights in Honduras, and is a step on the way to ensuring that those who violate human rights are held accountable for their actions.

The case had been investigated by AI, and was highlighted in the 1994 report Honduras: Children unprotected from abuse (AI Index: AMR 37/07/94).

## WORLDWIDE APPEALS

**COLOMBIA:** Suspected extrajudicial execution of two human rights activists

In the early hours of 19 May 1997, five men armed with sub-machine guns broke into the home of two human rights and environmental workers -- Elsa Constanza Alvarado and Carlos Mario Calderón -- in the capital, Bogotá. The gunmen, believed to be members of a paramilitary group, killed the couple and Elsa's father, Carlos Alvarado Pantoja. Elsa's mother, Elvira Chacón de Alvarado, was seriously wounded. When the police reached the apartment, they found the couple's baby son sitting by the bullet-ridden bodies.

Mario Calderón and Elsa Constanza Alvarado, both university professors, worked for the Centre for Research and Popular Education (CINEP), one of the oldest and most widely respected human rights organizations in Colombia; its work centres on social and economic issues, including the promotion and defence of human rights. In recent months several members of CINEP have been the target of death threats.

Human rights workers in Colombia are increasingly being harassed and intimidated by the security forces and their paramilitary allies because of their work in exposing human rights violations and campaigning against the failure of the authorities to pursue and bring to account those responsible, thus encouraging further human rights violations.

+ Please write, deploring the shooting of the Calderón / Alvarado family;

calling for a prompt, impartial and

thorough investigation into the killings; and urging that all appropriate measures be undertaken to protect the safety of human rights defenders in Colombia; to: President Ernesto Samper Pizano/ Palacio de Nariño/ Carrera 8 No. 7-26, Santafé de Bogotá/ Colombia. Also raise your concerns about this case with your own government.

**TURKEY:** Human rights defender tortured and imprisoned

The chairman of the Sanliurfa branch of the Turkish Human Rights Association (HRA), Aziz Durmaz, was detained at Sanliurfa Police Headquarters on 24 June 1997. His lawyer reported that while he was there, he was beaten, kept in a freezer, suspended, beaten on the soles of the feet (falaka), and given electric shocks.

On 29 June, Aziz Durmaz was formally arrested and committed to Sanliurfa Prison, where he is currently awaiting trial. A statement issued by the Sanliurfa Chief of Police alleges that he has links with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and that firearms had been found on his property; Aziz Durmaz has denied these charges in a written statement. He claims that the evidence against him is fabricated, and is simply a pretext for the Turkish authorities to close down the Sanliurfa branch of the HRA. He has also alleged that people he did not know had been tortured into making incriminating statements against him.

The Sanliurfa branch of the HRA was closed down indefinitely on 27 June. It joins several other regional HRA branches that have been silenced by the Turkish authorities in recent months. Such closures reflect a concerted effort by the Turkish authorities to silence all those who seek to speak out about Turkey's human rights record.

+ Please write, calling for a full and impartial investigation into Aziz Durmaz's allegations of torture; asking that no statements extracted under torture be used in proceedings against him; and expressing concern about the attempts to silence the Turkish Human Rights Association; to: Murat Baseskioglu/ Minister of the Interior/ İçişleri Bakanligi/ Ankara/ Turkey.

**Viet Nam:** Concerns for the health of prisoners of conscience

There are concerns for the health of four Roman Catholic brothers and two priests who have spent the last 10 years in prison in Viet Nam. All are members of the Congregation of the Mother Coredemptrix, a Catholic evangelical order founded in Viet Nam in 1942 and officially recognized by the Vatican in 1953.

Brother Nguyen Chau Dat (aged 72), Brother Mai Duc Chuong (66), Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (46), Brother Nguyen Van Thin (45), Reverend Dinh Viet Hieu (58), and Reverend Pham Ngoc Lien (55), were among 23 members of the Congregation of the Mother Coredemptrix arrested in May 1987 for holding training courses and distributing religious books without government permission. The Vietnamese Government exercises strict control over religious institutions in the country, and members of churches not officially recognized may be detained under national security legislation. All were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, mostly between 18 and 20 years. AI considers them prisoners of conscience, detained solely for exercising their right to freedom of religion.

AI understands that the six men are currently suffering very poor health. Daily hard labour, an inadequate diet, and poor medical care have taken their toll -- some of the men are very weak, one has severe arthritis, and another has a heart condition and high blood pressure.

+ Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of the six men, and urging that, pending their release, they are provided with proper medical attention and a healthy diet, to:  
President Le Duc Anh/ 35 Ngo Quyen/ Ho Chi Minh City/ Viet Nam.

## KENYA CAMPAIGN

Pierre Sané (right), AI Secretary General, talks to the family of a Kenyan man killed in police custody.

During a two-week mission to Kenya in June, an AI delegation also met with government representatives, opposition leaders, human rights activists, professional groups, business leaders and members of the international community.

The delegation launched AI's Human Rights Manifesto for Kenya (Swahili version pictured left), a publication that sets out the reforms essential for improving respect for human rights in Kenya.

The mission received national and international publicity, while the manifesto was welcomed by NGOs and reprinted in several newspapers.

## IRAN

### WORLDWIDE APPEAL UPDATE

In late June the Iranian authorities announced that Faraj Sarkouhi (Worldwide Appeals, July 1997) had gone on trial on charges including "spying for a foreign country and attempting to illegally leave the country". AI was not allowed to send an observer to the trial, having been informed by the Iranian authorities that "it was not an appropriate time" for an AI delegation to visit Iran. AI continues to fear that Faraj Sarkouhi may be a prisoner of conscience.

Please note that appeals should now be addressed to the new President:

His Excellency the President/ Hojjatoleslam val moslemin Sayed

Mohammad Khatami/ The Presidency/

Palestine Avenue/ Azerbaijan Intersection/Tehran/ Islamic Republic of Iran.

## LIBYA APPEAL CASE

Mansur Kikhiya (right), a prominent Libyan human rights activist and opposition leader, "disappeared" in December 1993 after attending the general conference of the Arab Organization for Human Rights in Cairo, Egypt. He is a former Foreign Minister and was Libya's representative

to the United Nations until 1980, when he resigned in protest at executions of political opponents by the Libyan authorities. Since then he has been an active opponent of the government, living in exile in France.

Reports indicate that he may have been abducted by Libyan government agents and taken back to Libya.

The Egyptian authorities have never made public the results of investigations into this "disappearance".

+ Please write:

to the Libyan authorities seeking information as to the whereabouts of Mansur Kikhiya:  
Colonel Mu'ammarr al-Gaddafi/ Leader of the Revolution/ Office of the Leader of the Revolution/  
Tripoli/ Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya;  
to the Egyptian authorities calling on them to make public the results of their investigation.  
His Excellency Muhammad Hosni Mubarak/ President of the Arab Republic of Egypt/ 'Abedine  
Palace/Cairo/Egypt.

## SWITZERLAND

Nigerian lawyer alleges racism and ill-treatment by Swiss police

Clement Nwankwo, a prominent Nigerian lawyer and human rights activist, was visiting Geneva in April 1997 to give evidence to the UN Commission on Human Rights. He was arrested in the centre of town and detained, first in police custody, then in prison, for about 72 hours. After being found guilty of shoplifting and opposing the police, he was released. He has since been cleared of the first charge on appeal and is pursuing an appeal against the second.

In a complaint made to the Geneva administrative authorities, Clement Nwankwo, who has recently received a major human rights award, gave an account of his arrest and detention. He said that six police officers surrounded him on the street, and that one pushed him back roughly against a wall. As he struggled to retain his balance, he said, one of the officers hit him in the face, smashing his spectacles. As he considered himself in serious danger, he continued, he began to shout his name and that of his hotel, whereupon the officers started to kick, punch and beat him and subjected him to racist abuse. He said that one of the officers put a baton across his neck, exerting such pressure he lost consciousness. At the police station, he said, he was stripped naked, and then left in his underpants, handcuffed to a table leg in an interview room. A medical examination carried out the day after his release revealed injuries consistent with his allegations. Following an administrative investigation into the incident, the head of Geneva's justice and police department argued that it was Clement Nwankwo's "strong resistance" to arrest that led the police officers to use force. However, he apologized for "the conditions" of his detention in the police interview room, and promised sanctions against the officers concerned.

In recent years, AI, the UN and the Council of Europe have all expressed concern about allegations of police ill-treatment in Switzerland -- in particular the high proportion concerning foreign nationals -- and about the lack of certain fundamental safeguards against ill-treatment for people held in police custody.

## FOCUS

### TUNISIA - A WIDENING CIRCLE OF REPRESSION

'If they discover that I am in contact with my husband, it's finished, they will put me in prison'

These words were spoken by the wife of an exiled opponent of the government. Every time she contacts her husband, she risks her freedom. In Tunisia, relatives of government opponents have increasingly risked detention, torture and ill-treatment -- they have been caught in the cross-fire of the authorities' systematic harassment of those they see as opponents.

This policy of intimidation has, over the past few years, inflicted untold damage on Tunisian society. Countless families have been destroyed by the government's determination to combat dissent, while critics themselves have been detained and imprisoned, tortured and ill-treated in attempts to silence or punish them. Several human rights defenders have been imprisoned and then harassed after their release, while many others have been intimidated.

Indeed, far from adhering to its stated commitments to human rights in general, and to the human rights of women in particular, the Tunisian Government has brought in new measures which further curtail freedom of expression and association and which make it even more difficult for human rights issues to be raised.

Those men and women who have the courage to speak out about their ordeals to the outside world are often subjected to further harassment and intimidation directed not only at themselves, but also at those who take up their defence.

To date, not a single independent investigation has been carried out into formal complaints of human rights violations in Tunisia. This contravenes both Tunisian law and the international treaties to which Tunisia is a party. Victims of human rights violations in Tunisia have been denied any right to redress, and those responsible for the violations remain unaccountable for their actions.

#### Human rights defenders under attack

Some 10 prisoners of conscience have been released since 1995, but most releases were conditional; for many, the end of their imprisonment signalled the beginning of systematic harassment by the police. The released prisoners are under constant police surveillance, some have been redetained and interrogated, and most have had their passports confiscated.

One of those released in 1996 was Najib Hosni, a human rights lawyer. He had been arrested in June 1994 and sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in January 1996 on fabricated charges of falsifying a land contract. Following intense international pressure, he was conditionally released in December 1996 -- but immediately rearrested and questioned about an interview he had given to the foreign news media. He remains under strict and constant surveillance: his telephone is disconnected and his mail intercepted, his passport has been confiscated and he is barred from resuming his work as a lawyer. No investigation was ever carried out into his complaint that he was tortured during interrogation in the Ministry of the Interior at the end of 1995.

People working for human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also been targeted. Khemais Chammari, former Secretary General of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) and a member of parliament for the opposition Movement of Socialist Democrats, was arrested in April 1996 and sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Following an international outcry, he was conditionally released in December 1996. However, the conditions of his release included a ban on any form of political activity and he has been kept under police surveillance since his release. Other LTDH workers have also been the victims of intimidation.

Tunisian nationals who work for or are members of AI have also been harassed, despite the fact that the organization's statute clearly stipulates that AI members and staff are not involved in the work on the human rights situation in their own country. Kamal Sammari, a Tunisian national working for AI in London, was detained and questioned when he returned to Tunisia for a holiday last year. He was held in secret detention for a week, during which time his family were unable to obtain any information as to his whereabouts and were kept under constant police surveillance to prevent them from alerting the outside world to his arrest. In March 1997 Hechmi Jegham, President of the Tunisian Section of AI and a well-known lawyer, was questioned for several hours on two occasions about an international lawyers' conference which was scheduled to take place in Tunisia. The conference was subsequently banned.

#### Increased restrictions on civil liberties

A series of measures introduced by the authorities in recent years has imposed severe restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and association. As a result, many human rights organizations and other NGOs have found it impossible to carry on their work; one after another they have effectively been silenced. These restrictions and the systematic harassment of human rights defenders have combined to create an atmosphere of intimidation where reporting of the human rights situation in the country by the news media has all but ceased.

Two recent measures in particular have been seen as part of a deliberate policy to further reduce the opportunities for raising human rights issues. In January 1997 a circular was issued by the Ministry of Higher Education requiring anyone organizing a meeting or conference in Tunisia to submit details of the meeting -- including a list of participants and the agenda -- to the Ministry of the Interior in advance. Organizers must also submit the text of any speeches or conference papers for legal registration.

This was followed in March 1997 by a circular, issued by the Ministry of Tourism, which requires hotel managers to inform the police of details of any function to be held in their hotel -- including the name of the organizer and the number and nationalities of the participants -- and specifies that police authorization is necessary in all cases. This formalizes the previously unwritten but nonetheless well-known rule that police authorization is necessary for all meetings.

The full consequences of these new measures for freedom of speech in Tunisia have yet to be seen. However, in the context of the authorities' past violations of this right, the future looks bleak. Over the past few years, scores of human rights conferences and meetings have been prevented from taking place -- some as a result of outright bans, others because of government pressure on the hotels where the events were scheduled to be held.

Other government restrictions on human rights activities have included banning researchers from human rights organizations, including AI, from entering the country. Those representatives of human rights NGOs who have been able to gain entry to Tunisia have been subjected to tight restrictions and constant surveillance. Foreign journalists have often been followed or prevented from meeting victims of human rights violations, and several have been denied access to the country or expelled.

Such surveillance is clearly aimed at deterring those who wish to meet human rights activists and victims of human rights violations. It also serves as a clear warning to the victims themselves that such contacts are likely to lead to further harassment and intimidation by the authorities.

#### DETENTION, TORTURE AND ILL-TREATMENT OF PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

The detention and imprisonment -- and subsequent torture and ill-treatment -- of those accused of political opposition activities remain widespread.

In the past 18 months, AI has received information about hundreds of people who have been detained or imprisoned as prisoners of conscience. The majority of those arrested are men and

women who are alleged to have supported or attended meetings of the unauthorized Islamist group al-Nahda (Renaissance) while it was active in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and relatives of imprisoned or exiled Islamist opponents.

Ahlam Garat-Ali, a mother of four, and Salwa Dimassi (pictured above) were arrested in May 1996 with a group of other women and men. They were placed in incommunicado detention and reportedly beaten and ill-treated. The police interrogated them primarily about their meetings with other supporters of al-Nahda in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both women are still in prison awaiting trial on charges of belonging to a "terrorist gang".

Suspected members or supporters of left-wing groups have also been the victims of increasing harassment and repression. Several have been detained or imprisoned as prisoners of conscience. Among them is Moncef Zidi, a 38-year-old librarian from Nabeul and a supporter of the unauthorized Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (PCOT), who was arrested at the end of December 1996. He was held in secret detention in Nabeul police station for nine days, during which time he was beaten and ill-treated before being released on bail.

Members of the Tunisian Workers' General Union (UGTT) issued petitions in January and April 1997 condemning the increasing restrictions on political and civil liberties, freedom of expression and information and trade union rights. Nine members of the UGTT were arrested in connection with these petitions. Five were released after interrogation, but the other four were held in secret detention, some in the Ministry of the Interior, for up to 14 days. At the beginning of May, they were brought before a judge and charged with possessing and distributing leaflets, spreading false information liable to disturb public order and insulting an official institution. They were released on bail at the end of May and are awaiting trial.

Abdel Moumen Belanes (pictured below left), Ali Jallouli and Bachir Abid were accused of supporting the unauthorized Union of Communist Youth and the PCOT. They were first arrested in November 1995, held in secret detention and tortured. They were reportedly suspended in contorted positions; their heads were plunged into buckets of water and chemicals while they were suspended on a pulley; they were given electric shocks and beaten, especially on the head and genitals; and they were deprived of sleep for up to seven days. They were released on bail after more than three months in detention, but were detained again on several occasions. Abdel Moumen Belanes was rearrested in March and sentenced to one year's imprisonment on charges of "insulting persons in authority" -- he was accused of having said, during a previous period of imprisonment, that Tunisian newspapers were full of pictures of the President and ministers. He went on hunger-strike for 26 days in March and April to protest at his detention, the lack of medical care and poor prison conditions. In April and May his family and lawyers were refused permission to visit him for several weeks, during which time he was beaten and tortured by prison guards. Complaints and requests for an investigation lodged by his lawyers have to date been ignored by the judicial authorities.

The failure of the authorities to carry out adequate and impartial investigations into allegations of torture violates Tunisia's obligations under the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which also requires the government to "take effective legislative, administrative, judicial and other measures to prevent acts of torture...".

The family — a target for political repression

In recent years, hundreds of wives and relatives of political prisoners and exiled government opponents have been harassed, detained, interrogated, ill-treated and tortured in order to "punish" them for having remained in contact with their imprisoned or exiled relatives, and to put pressure on them to break off such contacts and even to divorce their husbands.

Most face repeated short-term detention and interrogation, often accompanied by ill-treatment and torture, including sexual abuse. During interrogation, they are usually questioned about their

contacts with their exiled or imprisoned husbands and about how they and their families are managing to survive. The questions put to them often show a detailed knowledge about their daily lives which suggests that they are kept under strict surveillance. If they receive any financial help, even from relatives, both those receiving and those giving the assistance can be prosecuted for unauthorized collection of funds. Mere survival has therefore become increasingly difficult for many women and children.

Mahjouba Boukhris, a 35-year-old nurse and mother of three whose husband is serving a 12-year prison sentence, was sentenced to over seven years' imprisonment in November 1996 on charges of unauthorized collection of funds and participating in a "terrorist gang". The only "evidence" produced by the prosecution was police statements in which she admitted having met other al-Nahda sympathizers and participating in the collection of some money for prisoners' families. She later stated in court that she had been forced to sign these statements under duress.

Ali Khelifi and his wife fled Tunisia in 1992 and sought asylum in France. Since then, their six children, who are unable to leave Tunisia and join their parents, have been cared for by Ali Khelifi's brother (who has nine children of his own and who is also caring for the six children of another deceased brother). In February 1997, the brother's neighbour was sentenced to one year's imprisonment and a heavy fine. His crime was to have given money to Ali Khelifi's brother to help him look after the children.

Dozens of women have told AI that they were undressed, threatened with rape and sexually abused during interrogation in the Ministry of the Interior and in police and National Guard stations across the country. Sometimes the police use such methods as a way of putting pressure on the women to divorce their imprisoned or exiled husbands.

The ordeal of Samira Ben Salah (pictured right) began after her husband, a supporter of al-Nahda sought by the authorities, fled the country in 1991. For several months she was subjected to a familiar pattern of repeated arrest, short-term detention and interrogation and, in October 1992, she was sentenced to six months' imprisonment. After her release she was repeatedly arrested. During interrogation, often in the Ministry of the Interior itself; she was undressed, sexually abused, threatened with rape, and told to divorce her husband.

After more than two years of repeated arrest and torture and continuing threats, she agreed to file for divorce, hoping that this would spare her further persecution. However, in October 1996, as her divorce hearing approached, she was informed by the security forces that she would have to marry a man of their choice. At that point she decided to contact a lawyer and to inform the outside world of her plight. After a high-profile international campaign on her behalf, her divorce procedure was annulled by the court, and in December 1996 she was allowed to leave Tunisia with her four daughters and join her husband in exile in Germany.

### Broken Families

Women whose husbands are in exile face a terrible choice: they must either accept that they will never see their husbands again or attempt to leave the country illegally and risk long prison sentences if they are caught. Whichever choice they make, their families are destroyed.

Many women would like to leave Tunisia to escape the repression and to join their exiled husbands, but are unable to obtain passports for themselves and their children. After the husbands of Aicha Dhaouadi and Tourkia Hamadi fled Tunisia in 1992 -- both men were charged with supporting al-Nahda -- the two women were repeatedly arrested, interrogated and ill-treated. In 1995 they were imprisoned for nine and six months' respectively, and their small children had to be taken care of by other relatives. After their release, they had to report regularly to the police and were unable to leave the country.

In April 1997, following a campaign on the women's behalf by AI and other organizations, the Tunisian Government informed AI that, "in the framework of the humanitarian dimension of the

action of the Tunisian Government, Aicha Dhaouadi and Tourkia Hamadi were given passports so as to allow them to join their husbands abroad, in spite of their activism within a secret and extremist movement". Thus the fundamental right of every individual to freedom of movement, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 13), is seen by the Tunisian authorities as a right which may be arbitrarily withheld or granted as a "humanitarian gesture". In June Aicha Dhaouadi and Tourkia Hamadi were able to leave Tunisia with their children and join their husbands in France. To AI's knowledge, Aicha Dhaouadi, Tourkia Hamadi and Samira Ben Salah are the only women who have been allowed to leave the country and join their exiled husbands. Scores of other wives and children of refugees continue to be prevented from leaving the country.

With little hope of obtaining a valid travel document, some women have tried to leave the country by other means. Jalila Jalleti, a pediatric nurse and mother of four, was routinely arrested, questioned, beaten and tortured and told to divorce her husband, a supporter of al-Nahda, after he left Tunisia in 1990. At the end of 1992 she was held for 17 days in secret detention, where she was beaten so severely that her leg was fractured, and sentenced to a year's imprisonment. Like others in her situation, the harassment continued long after her release from prison: she lost her job, had to report to the police up to five times a day, and could not obtain a passport. She fled the country with her children in May 1997. At the time of writing she was in hiding with her children in another country, without any travel documents, hoping to be able to join her husband, a refugee in Austria.

Other women who have tried to flee the country without passports have been caught and imprisoned. Rachida Ben Salem (pictured above), whose husband left Tunisia in 1992 and is now a refugee in the Netherlands, was arrested in May 1997 with her two daughters as she was attempting to cross into a neighbouring country, from where she hoped to be able to go to join her husband. She was held in secret detention with her daughters for a week. The children, aged five and seven, were then released into the care of her parents and she was transferred to prison. She continues to be detained awaiting trial on charges of belonging to a "criminal gang".

Such stories stand in stark contrast to the Tunisian authorities' stated commitment to human rights. They illustrate the extent to which the family, human rights defenders, indeed anyone who dares to question or criticize government policies have become the targets of a policy of suppressing dissent and silencing opponents. There is an urgent need for the Tunisian authorities to live up to their international obligations and to turn the rhetoric of human rights promotion and protection into a reality.

This Focus is based on an AI 19-page document, Tunisia: A widening circle of repression, June 1997 (AI Index: MDE 30/25/97).

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO

Ask that the Tunisian authorities release all prisoners of conscience, and stop the harassment of former prisoners of conscience and the families of prisoners and refugees.

Write Polite letters to....

Président M. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali  
Président de la République  
Palais Présidentiel  
Tunis,  
Tunisia  
Fax: (+216) 174 4721