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@AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NAMES 339 DETAINEES KILLED IN MAURITANIA

Amnesty International today released a list of some 339 political prisoners reported killed in Mauritania's prisons, military barracks or police stations over a five month period -- and again urged the government to carry out an open and impartial investigation into the deaths.

AI has eyewitness reports of more than 140 people killed between November 1990 and March this year, some of them hanged without ever having been tried and others after brutal torture. Reliable information has been received on a further 200 killed in custody.

The human rights organization said the striking details of those deaths have emerged in recent months following the release of many political prisoners who survived their detention.

Most of the prisoners who died or were killed were army officers or civil servants belonging to black ethnic groups from the south. All of them were men, as Amnesty International's list shows. They were rounded up in sweeping arrests in the country's two largest cities. The government has alleged that they were involved in a coup plot, but in reality it appears that they were picked up simply because of their ethnic origin.

"For years, black ethnic groups have been the target of abuses, with arrests, torture and extrajudicial executions routine in the south," Amnesty International said. "These killings are part of that pattern of repression."

Most of the deaths seem to have been the direct result of torture or ill-treatment, including extremely harsh prison conditions. Former prisoners have told Amnesty International that detainees were subjected to the "Jaguar" torture, where victims are hung upside down and beaten on the soles of their feet. Others had electric shocks applied to their genitals or had their skin and flesh burnt all over their bodies; many were buried up to their necks in sand for up to three hours.

Some who survived gave testimony to the torture they had endured. One army officer arrested in November last year told Amnesty International that he was first stripped, bound at the hands and feet, beaten and urinated on. He was tortured again in a room containing corpses and then chained up and beaten in a large hall.

Another army officer lost the use of one eye as a result of cigarette burns. Several detainees were said to have had a cord tied round their genitals which was then pulled tight causing extreme pain.

Since Amnesty International called on the government in April 1991 to investigate reports that more than 200 political prisoners had died, the authorities have remained silent on their fate, refusing to acknowledge that any deaths at all occurred.

Despite this official silence, it seems the authorities did order a commission of inquiry, composed entirely of military personnel, to investigate the allegations. Some members of the commission are even said to have been directly involved in the interrogation of prisoners from November 1990 onwards.

No details of the inquiry have been revealed, however, and despite unofficial information that it has concluded its work, no report of its findings has been made public. Unofficial sources suggest that some senior officers at barracks where a number of detainees' deaths occurred have since been transferred elsewhere, but no legal or disciplinary proceedings against any of those responsible for the human rights violations are known to have been instigated.

AI says that the government's response since April, including the secret inquiry it ordered, has been completely inadequate.

Relatives of those who have died or been killed in detention are demanding government clarification of the fate of the missing prisoners and open letters have circulated signed by prominent people, including several former government ministers and the chairman of the main local human rights organization demanding investigations into the recent arrests and deaths and also democratic political reforms.

As well as publishing details about the 339 prisoners who are feared dead, AI is repeating its demand for an independent and impartial inquiry whose findings and methods of investigations should be made public, to establish what has happened to everyone who was arrested, to establish the cause and responsibility for the death of each of those who died so that everyone responsible for ordering or carrying out torture or extrajudicial executions can be brought to justice.