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Climate of fear in Syria's hospitals as patients and medics targeted

The Syrian government has turned hospitals into instruments of repression in its efforts to crush opposition, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

The 39-page report *Health Crisis: Syrian Government Targets the Wounded and Health Workers* documents how wounded patients in at least four government-run hospitals have been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment, including by medical workers.

Hospital workers suspected of treating protesters and others injured in unrest-related incidents have themselves faced arrest and torture.

"It is deeply alarming that the Syrian authorities seem to have given the security forces a free rein in hospitals, and that in many cases hospital staff appear to have taken part in torture and ill treatment of the very people they are supposed to care for," said Cilina Nasser, Amnesty International Middle East and North Africa researcher.

"Given the scale and seriousness of the injuries being sustained by people across the country, it is disturbing to find that many consider it safer to risk not having major wounds treated rather than going to proper medical facilities."

Amnesty International found that patients have been assaulted by medical staff, health workers and security personnel in at least the National Hospitals in Baniyas, Homs and Tell Kalakh and the military hospital in Homs.

One doctor at Homs military hospital told Amnesty International he had seen four doctors and more than 20 nurses abusing patients.

"Ahmed" was delivered unconscious to the National Hospital in Tell Kalakh on 22 August after being beaten by security forces. A witness saw him in the emergency room:

"There were around seven or eight security men, some carrying rifles, and nurses wearing white robes crowded around him. He opened his eyes and said: 'Where am I?' They all suddenly jumped on him and started beating him and hitting him."

Patients have also been removed from hospitals. On 7 September, security forces looking for an alleged armed field commander opposed to the government raided al-Birr wa al-Khadamat Hospital in Homs. When they did not find him, they arrested 18 wounded people.

A health worker present during the raid told Amnesty International he saw at least one unconscious patient having his ventilator removed before he was taken away.

Afraid of the consequences of going to a government hospital, many people have chosen to seek treatment either at private hospitals or at poorly equipped makeshift field hospitals.

Doctors at the National Hospital in Homs told Amnesty International that the number of admissions for firearms wounds has dropped significantly since May, in contrast to the spiralling toll of deaths and injuries on the streets outside.

But blood supplies in Syria can only be obtained from the Central Blood Bank, which is controlled by the Defence Ministry, leaving private hospitals with a terrible dilemma. One medic who had worked a private hospital in Homs told Amnesty International:

"We faced a dilemma every time we received a patient with a firearm injury and an urgent need of blood: if we send a request to the Central Blood Bank, the security would know about him and we would be putting him at risk of arrest and torture, and possibly death in custody."

Medical workers have themselves been targeted by security forces, some for treating injured people, others on suspicion of attending demonstrations or filming protesters.

On 7 August, around 20 soldiers and security forces raided a government hospital in Homs governorate, arresting seven hospital workers. One of the group told Amnesty International about his interrogation, during which some of his colleagues were badly beaten:

"[The interrogator] asked: 'do you want to be tortured or do you want to talk?' ... He accused me and my colleagues of treating the wounded without reporting them to the authorities, and asked me for the names of the wounded."

Amnesty International called on the Syrian authorities to give strict and clear instructions to all hospitals to accept and treat all wounded patients without delay, and to prioritize the interests of the patients over any other priorities.

"Syrian medical workers are being placed in an impossible situation - forced to choose between treating wounded people and preserving their own safety," said Cilina Nasser.

"The Syrian authorities must see sense and urgently act to ensure that all patients are treated equally, without discrimination based on their suspected political loyalties or activities."

"Anyone, whether a health worker or a member of the security forces, who is suspected of delaying, obstructing or interfering in the work of health workers providing treatment to the wounded must be held to account."

Notes for editors:

- Amnesty International spokespeople are available for interview on this report from London in English and Arabic.
- Audio-visual material (including interviews with Cilina Nasser and some supporting footage taken from youtube) will be available on request from Amnesty International on Monday 24 October.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566, email: press@amnesty.org or Twitter: @amnestypress

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK