

The torture of children -- the world's secret shame

"He had a pair of pliers in his hand. He kept asking where the mobile [phone] was. I told him I had not seen it....He got hold of my thumb and placed it between the pliers. He pressed it hard and crushed my thumb. I

do not remember what happened next."

Nine-year-old Firoz, victim of torture by police in Bangladesh.

Throughout the world, children are being subjected to horrific violence and abuse, according to a new Amnesty International report published ahead of Human Rights Day (December 10).

A part of Amnesty International's recently launched Campaign Against Torture, the report reveals that: children are tortured because they are caught up in wars and political conflict; children suspected of criminal activity are most at risk of torture at the hands of the state; children are often detained in conditions that pose a threat to their health and safety, and many children face being beaten or sexually abused by the very adults who are supposed to protect them.

"This abuse continues to be the world's secret shame, a daily reality ignored by governments everywhere. Most children suffer in silence, their stories never told, their tormentors never called to account," Amnesty International said.

Entitled *Hidden scandal, secret shame*, the report says that torture can have a profound impact on the body and mind of a developing child. Those who are tortured repeatedly, or over long periods of time, are likely to suffer permanent personality changes. Serious physical trauma

may disrupt or distort normal growth patterns, and cause permanent weakness or disability.

"Around the world we see the same patterns of abuse: there is little difference between how police treat children in China and how they treat them in Brazil; there is little difference between conditions of detention in Paraguay and Russia; and violence against children in armed conflict is equally devastating in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan."

Police Custody

In some countries beatings are considered a normal consequence of arrest and some police officers rely on torture as a method of interrogation. Children have been struck with fists, sticks, chair legs, gun-butts, whips, iron pipes and electrical cords. They have suffered concussion, internal bleeding, broken bones, lost teeth and ruptured organs. Children detained by police have also been sexually assaulted; burned with cigarettes or electricity; exposed to extremes of heat and cold; deprived of food, drink or sleep; or made to stand, sit or hang for long hours.

Children are entangled in the web of the current conflict in Israel and the Occupied Territories. So far at least 90 Palestinian children have been killed. Hundreds of Palestinian children, as well as some Israeli children, have been injured. Palestinian children have often been arrested late at night or early in the morning and interrogated soon after they reached the police station. Some were handcuffed following arrest and during interrogation, reportedly beaten by police officers, intimidated and subjected to extreme psychological pressure.

At about 2am on 24 October, a dozen Israeli police, armed with machine guns, came to arrest Bakr Sa'id, a 15 year old boy, at his home in Kufar Kana. Four armed police officers went to where Bakr Sa'id was sleeping and arrested the boy. Bakr Sa'id was reportedly interrogated for

several hours in the early morning by three interrogators in civilian clothes who shouted and threatened him. Later in the day he was brought to court, but his father was not allowed to speak to him. Another detainee in court said he saw a police officer slap Bakr Sa'id in the face.

Sexual Abuse in Custody

Boys and girls in custody are vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse, both from state agents and other inmates. Many children try to hide the fact that they have been raped, others are simply too embarrassed or ashamed to talk about it and many cases go unreported and unpunished.

N.C.S., a 16-year-old Kurdish girl was detained with her friend at police headquarters in Iskenderun, Turkey, in March 1999. She was forced to stand continuously for two days, prevented from using the toilet and only given sour milk to drink. During the interrogation she was beaten on the head, genitals, buttocks and breasts, forced to roll naked in water, suspended by the arms and hosed with pressurized cold water. She was also subjected to a "virginity test". N.C.S. was sentenced to a long prison term after being charged with being a member of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), but typically none of the police officers have so far been brought to justice.

Street Children

An estimated 100 million children live and work on the streets where they are particularly vulnerable. Amnesty International has documented torture and ill-treatment against street children in many countries, including Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, India, Kenya, Nepal and Uganda.

Juvenile Detention Centres

Conditions in juvenile detention centres, orphanages and other institutions can also amount to torture. A class action filed in February in South Dakota, USA, alleged that children held in the State Training School in Plankington were forced to lie on their backs, spread-eagled, on a concrete bed in an isolation cell for hours at a time, including overnight. Girls held in this position had been stripped naked by male staff, sometimes having their clothes cut off with scissors.

Physical abuse is a fact of life for many young detainees. A former inmate of the Panchito López juvenile detention centre in Paraguay said: "Life in Panchito is hard. For punishments there were beatings on the soles of the feet or on the palms of the hands, or kicks in the stomach. Boys were stripped naked and hung upside down on the patio and beaten with sticks, or else they made you stand on your hands up against the wall. You had to stay still like that for as long as they wanted, if you fell down they beat you. They'd hang you from a pillar or from the doorway. They hung me up for three hours, and all the guards that passed by hit me. If someone does something and they don't discover who, everyone in the block is beaten with sticks."

Armed Conflict

Children are particularly vulnerable in situations of armed conflict -- as child soldiers, refugees, innocent bystanders. Many children are tortured simply because they live in an "enemy zone", or because of the politics, religion or ethnic origin of their family. Children have suffered on an unprecedented scale during the nine years of civil war in Sierra Leone -- thousands have been killed, mutilated, abducted and forced to fight, or raped and forced into sexual slavery.

Many children in Sierra Leone, themselves victims, have been forced to kill, mutilate or rape, often under the influence of drugs or alcohol or through fear. "Komba", now aged 15, was captured by rebel

forces in 1997. He told AI in June 2000 that he was among rebel forces who attacked Freetown in January 1999: "My legs were cut with blades and cocaine was rubbed in the wounds. Afterwards, I felt like a big person. I saw the other people like chickens and rats. I wanted to kill them."

Amnesty International is calling on governments around the world to publicly condemn the torture of children whenever it occurs, investigate all allegations of torture, ensure it is expressly prohibited in law and that torturers are brought to justice. The leaders of armed opposition groups should also make clear to their forces that torture is unacceptable.

"The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world, but governments continue to fail to live up to the principles and commitments it contains. By allowing the violence against children to continue, we put at risk our future," the organization said.

Members of the public can join Amnesty International's Campaign Against Torture by registering online at www.stoptorture.org

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For more information or a copy of the report please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566, or visit web : <http://www.stoptorture.org>

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