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@WOMEN ON THE FRONT LINE:
NEW REPORT DETAILS "BARBARIC" ABUSES OF WOMEN
IN MORE THAN 40 COUNTRIES

Amnesty International today (8 March 1991) called for an end to the "barbaric" abuse of women by state security forces in every region of the world.

In its first major report on women victims of human rights violations, Amnesty International details abuses inflicted on women in over 40 countries and says the victims have included babies, teenagers, pregnant mothers and women in their sixties.

"The world's torturers, executioners and jailers are no less cruel to women," Amnesty International said. "No torture is deemed too barbaric to be inflicted on women, no term of arbitrary imprisonment too long."

The report - released on International Women's Day and submitted to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women now meeting in Vienna - describes a wide range of abuses inflicted on women and men alike, as well as those suffered mainly by women simply because of their sex or their role in their family or society.

The human rights organization said that governments have for years singled out women they see as outspoken critics or easy targets -- women who demand respect for basic rights or those who will do almost anything to protect their children.

Female political activists in China and Myanmar have been unjustly jailed, black Mauritanian women have been gunned down by soldiers and female students in Turkey have been tortured.

"Young and old women are raped by prison guards, pregnant women are beaten, and others are used to get at their husbands or brothers," Amnesty International said.

Rape, for example, is one of the most common methods soldiers and prison guards use to torture women. In some countries it is commonly used to force confessions; in others it is used as punishment.

In India, reports of rape by police are so common that a newspaper has said "cop molests woman" is an almost daily story. In Peru, Amnesty International has documented a pattern of rape throughout the emergency zones where soldiers have sweeping powers.

"Rape is sometimes the torture method of choice," Amnesty International said, "simply because the social stigma in many cultures virtually guarantees that women won't talk about it afterwards."

Women refugees often have to deal with rape and sexual harassment both in their country and after fleeing. According to the United Nations, rape is often the persecution that drives them away from home and sexual favours are frequently the price for relief goods or documentation.

In many other cases, soldiers and police officers have subjected women to a catalogue of sexual abuse or threats to intimidate them. Former prisoners have told Amnesty International of being fondled, molested, strip-searched without justification and threatened with rape. In one case in Chad, a group of 10 women prisoners were reportedly forced to work as prostitutes. For some women who were pregnant during their detention, such torture and ill-treatment or a lack of medical care has even led to miscarriages.

Governments will often exploit a woman's family connections to break her or her relatives. More than 70 Syrian women have been detained since 1987 because of the political activities of their

husbands and sons; a gun was held to the head of a two-year old child in Guatemala to force the mother to deliver a warning to her activist brother.

"Some of the most disturbing abuses, however, have no gender label," Amnesty International said. "Along with men, women are jailed after unfair trials, 'disappear' in military custody, and are shot dead by 'death squads' or soldiers."

The women who have "disappeared" - some after eye witnesses saw soldiers take them away - have included suspected members of armed opposition groups in Sri Lanka, civilians in Peru's emergency zones and community activists in the Philippines.

Human rights activists and investigators have also been gunned down by "death squads" or soldiers. In South Africa, suspicion remains that an officially sanctioned "death squad" killed human rights lawyer Nonyamezelo Victoria Mxenge, even though an inquest and a subsequent inquiry reached no conclusion on who killed her. And in Colombia, a woman magistrate involved in investigating reported extrajudicial executions by the military was herself shot dead, apparently in such a killing.

Women, too, are among the thousands of people unjustly jailed on grounds of conscience or after trials that fall far short of international standards in many countries - trials where verdicts may be decided beforehand and appeals are unheard of.

Some women spend years in detention without ever being charged or tried, like opposition party leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar (Burma). Under house arrest since 1989, she was disqualified from last year's elections and has not been released despite her party's election victory.

"When governments ignore their responsibility to protect the rights of one sector of society," Amnesty International said, "no one's human rights are safe."

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