

Bolivia: Torture under international scrutiny

The United Nations Committee Against Torture should challenge the apparent failure by the Bolivian authorities to take concrete measures to eradicate torture, Amnesty International said today.

The Committee is beginning today to examine in Geneva Bolivia's initial report on the implementation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Despite the adoption of constitutional and legislative measures to protect human rights, torture and ill-treatment at the hands of the Bolivian security forces continue to be widely reported, suggesting the existence of a pattern of systematic and extensive violations over the years.

"The failure to thoroughly investigate reports of torture and ill-treatment breeds a climate of impunity which allows these practices to continue unchallenged," Amnesty International said. "Human rights defenders trying to break the wall of silence by publicly denouncing torture are often the target of attacks, threats and intimidation."

In a paper submitted to the Committee, Amnesty International is urging Committee members to give special consideration to a series of concerns, including:

Reports of abuses committed in the last months of 2000 in the context of the eradication of coca leaf crops in the area of El Chapare, Department of Cochabamba. Such abuses were committed by the police Mobile Rural Patrol Unit, UMOPAR, and by members of the

army who have unnecessarily raided homes and confiscated property from the inhabitants.

The imposition of sanctions amounting to torture on soldiers on compulsory military service. Several such incidents have been reported but in most cases no investigation has been opened into them.

Cases of torture and ill-treatment, including of minors, in police and military installations during the recent state of siege.

Instances of refugees being sent back to their countries regardless of the risk of torture they faced there.

Conditions in Bolivian prisons and detention centres -- where prisoners are crammed in inadequate, dirty cells with poor sanitation and ventilation and insufficient food and medical attention -- which amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. There are reports of prisoner ill-treatment by prison guards.

The failure by the Bolivian authorities to investigate cases of torture committed under previous governments and to bring those responsible to justice.

Per Art. 22 of the Convention against Torture, Amnesty International is also urging the Bolivian authorities to make a public declaration recognizing "the competence of the Committee to receive and consider communications from or on behalf of individuals subject to its jurisdiction who claim to be victims of a violation by a State Party of the Provisions of the Convention."

"Access to the Committee would provide the people of Bolivia with a further means to protect their rights to security and physical integrity," the organization said.

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