

0001 hrs gmt Wednesday 18 September 1991

EMEXICO: @TORTURE IN CUSTODY A DAILY FACT OF LIFE

Torture is reported almost daily in Mexico and anyone arrested is at risk from the minute they are picked up by the police or army, Amnesty International said today.

"Despite the seriousness of the problem, the Mexican authorities are doing little to put an effective stop to torture and ill-treatment," the worldwide human rights organization said.

Complaints of torture are rarely investigated by the courts and torturers almost never brought to justice -- all of which in practice fuels this abuse in the country.

Within the last two years Amnesty International has received reports about hundreds of cases of torture, including many where the victims died, although the organization believes the true number to be much higher.

Main torture methods are brutal beating and kicking, near-asphyxiation in water or with plastic bags, forcing mineral water mixed with chill powder into the nostrils, and electric shocks, Amnesty International said. Death threats and mock executions of detainees are also commonly reported.

In one case in the state of Michoacán, the mayor of Aguillilla was badly tortured when he complained about human rights violations committed during an anti-drugs operations in his region. Salomón Mendoza Barajas was arrested on the spot when he appeared at the local security headquarters to contact the commander. Police officers reportedly blindfolded, beat, kicked and stepped on him and a plastic bag was placed over his head while he was punched in the face and stomach.

He was held for seven months, then released without charge in December 1990 after international protest. Judicial investigations following his release have been totally inadequate and most of those responsible for his torture remain at large.

More recently, in the state of Chihuahua, Victor Manuel Oropeza, a doctor and human rights activist, was stabbed to death in July 1991 in his surgery. He had been receiving death threats after publishing a series of

articles in the local press complaining about human rights abuses by security agents. Oropeza was apparently tortured before being killed. Relatives, local human rights organizations and even some government officials criticized apparent irregularities in the subsequent police investigations.

Torture victims in Mexico come from a wide range of backgrounds -- they include people detained for political reasons or in the context of land disputes, human rights and indigenous activists, trade unionists, lawyers and criminal suspects. Even children have been subjected to brutal torture according to many cases reported to Amnesty International.

"This terrible pattern of violations clearly contradicts the government's repeatedly stressed commitment to human rights," the organization said. "Since 1986 a series of legal and administrative measures were adopted to end human rights abuses in Mexico, but these have failed to stop torture and ill-treatment."

Mexico has ratified nearly all international human rights treaties, including the United Nations Convention against Torture. The authorities have set up a National Human Rights Commission and made numerous statements in favour of a greater respect of human rights. Additionally the Mexican Congress adopted a federal anti-torture law which explicitly defines torture as a crime and provides for the imprisonment of those found guilty of inflicting or ordering it. Many Mexican states have adopted similar measures.

Yet Amnesty International continues to receive a great number of reports of human rights abuses. Constitutional safeguards are routinely violated and the victims of torture and their relatives are provided with few and inadequate means of seeking redress. When they complain they face harassment, intimidation and in some cases abduction or torture.

In court cases where medical or other testimonies clearly support the detainees' allegation of torture, judges have often decided that this has no bearing on the confession, and have refused to open investigations.

Amnesty International urges the Mexican government to take immediate and effective measures to end the continuing pattern of human rights violations. Arbitrary arrests and incommunicado detention must be prevented, strict controls over interrogation procedures should be guaranteed, the use of confessions extracted under coercion prohibited and judicial safeguards implemented.

"There is an urgent need for all reports of torture to be investigated by the courts and for those responsible to be brought to justice, to ensure that such abuses are no longer tolerated," Amnesty International said.

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT WEDNESDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 1991