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ISRAEL/SOUTH LEBANON: @KHIAM DETAINEES TORTURED AND ISOLATED

Detainees in the Kham detention centre in south Lebanon have been tortured during interrogation and many cut off from the outside world for years, according to an AI report released today.

About 200 detainees are held in the centre. "Most men and women held in Kham have been tortured to get information", AI said, "and we fear this pattern is continuing".

Although the overall conditions of detention have improved over the years, detainees in Kham have no access to families or to a humanitarian organization such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and appear to be held outside any legal framework, AI said.

The report gives detailed testimonies of former detainees. They tell of severe beatings with thick electric cables and being doused with water while hung from an electricity pole. They also tell of electric shocks of increasing voltage, the electrodes placed first on their fingers, then on more sensitive parts of the body such as the tongue, penis or nipples.

Former detainees have also described the torture or ill-treatment of close relatives. One detainee says his 50-year-old mother was tortured while held in Kham for three months. "They tortured her to put pressure on me", he told AI. "Eventually, when I heard her scream, I confessed".

Although the Kham detention centre is staffed by the South Lebanon Army (SLA), evidence indicates that Israeli officials have been directly involved in interrogation and torture in Kham, at least until 1988, and apparently continue to play a supervisory role in it, said AI.

Israeli and SLA officials have repeatedly offered the release of the detainees held in Kham, as well as at least 36 others held in Israel, in exchange for the release of four Israeli soldiers and eight SLA members still missing in Lebanon, or for information about them.

"On this basis, we believe the responsibility for the treatment and fate of the detainees in Kham lies with both Israel and the SLA", said AI. "As a minimum, they should see to it that all forms of torture and ill-treatment should be ended and visits by families and the ICRC be allowed without delay."

AI says it takes no position on the political and military conflict taking place in south Lebanon, or on any prisoner exchange that may be negotiated in the region or elsewhere. "We are aware that detainees in Kham may have been involved in violence against Israel and the SLA but if these detainees are held exclusively in order to compel others to release detainees or provide information about missing persons, they are to be regarded as hostages, and as such should be released immediately and unconditionally."

Since 1985 AI has repeatedly expressed concern about the detainees held in Kham to both the Israeli and SLA authorities. "The Israeli Government has consistently denied responsibility for them, despite evidence of involvement of Israeli officials in the centre and the fact that Israel is in a position to offer their release", AI said. The Israeli Government has also yet to clarify the situation of up to 36 detainees, mostly Lebanese from south Lebanon, who are held without charge or trial in Israel, some in undisclosed detention centres. AI raised their cases earlier this year.

Pointing to its wider human rights concerns in Lebanon, AI said it remains concerned about the fate of the Israeli soldiers and SLA members missing in Lebanon, who may also be held as hostages and, if so, should be released immediately and unconditionally.

"We are also concerned about 2,000 people, mostly Lebanese and Palestinians, whose names we know, and about a number of others who are still missing in Lebanon", the organization said. Most are believed to have been taken prisoner during the civil war by Lebanese militia or Syrian forces. Some may no longer be alive, others may be held as hostages. AI believes the total number is significantly higher than 2,000.

"The fate of all the people missing in Lebanon should be clarified by those who hold them", AI said. "No one should be tortured, and no one's freedom or safety should be dependent on the actions of others."

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