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ISRAEL AND THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES: HUMAN RIGHTS SHOULD NOT BE SACRIFICED IN THE NAME OF PEACE

Amnesty International's Secretary General Pierre Sané today welcomed the decision by Israel's Justice Minister to postpone the tabling of a bill which would have effectively legalized torture, and his commitment to ensure that the final bill will be in line with international standards against torture.

"We will continue to oppose any attempt to legalize torture in any form," Mr Sané said. "We believe Israel should, rather, take this opportunity to eradicate the morally reprehensible practice of torture across the board."

An Amnesty International delegation met twice with Justice Minister David Liba'i, including on the final day of a week long visit to the country (4-12 February).

In the course of the visit, the Justice Minister announced the decision to postpone consideration of the draft bill on the General Security Service (GSS), stated his willingness to accept comments from law departments and non-governmental organizations and gave assurances that both the GSS and the Prohibition of Torture bills would be in accordance with international standards.

However, the delegation expressed its serious concern with the continuing practice of torture, which includes hooding, sleep deprivation and violent shaking of detainees. On 22 January the Ministerial Committee for the GSS extended permission to use increased physical pressure for another three months.

During discussion of other issues, the minister gave assurances that Mordechai Vanunu's state of health and prison conditions are under constant review. Amnesty International has called for the immediate and unconditional release of Mordechai Vanunu* as redress for the persistent and past human rights violations to which he has been subjected.

In a meeting on Friday 9 February with Deputy Minister of Defence Ori Orr, the delegation raised concerns about the use of indefinite administrative detention. The longest held Palestinian administrative detainee, Ahmed Qatamesh, has been held since 1993.

"The logic of the argument is that people can be detained preventively forever if they are considered 'a danger' to the state, and the state apparently feels no obligation to make known the evidence on which it bases this conclusion," said Mr Sané.

Delegates raised the cases of Palestinian and Israeli administrative detainees, as well as those of Lebanese nationals held without trial or after the expiry of their sentences. Two of those held, Sheikh

'Abd al-Karim 'Ubayd and Mustafa Dirani, abducted from Lebanon in 1989 and 1994 respectively, are held incommunicado without access to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The Deputy Minister of Defence declined to clarify their legal status or provide information as to their whereabouts, stating "we will release them when we have more information about Ron Arad*". Amnesty International therefore considers them to be held as hostages and calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

Cases of unlawful killings or apparent extrajudicial executions were also raised with the Deputy Minister of Defence.

Earlier in the week, Amnesty International had a constructive exchange with Knesset members on the draft GSS and Prohibition of Torture bills, the practice of torture and ill-treatment, and Israel's obligations under international human rights treaties.

"This is no time for complacency on human rights. The public, human rights activists and the international community should not reduce their scrutiny of human rights in this transitional phase," said Mr Sané in concluding the eight-day visit. "Human rights should not be sacrificed in the name of peace."

BACKGROUND

*Ron Arad, an Israeli air force navigator, was captured alive when his jet was shot down during a mission over Lebanon in 1986. He was reported to be held by a Lebanese armed opposition group. Amnesty International continues to call for his fate to be clarified: if he is held as a hostage, he should be released immediately and unconditionally; if held captive he should be allowed as a minimum access to the ICRC and the ability to communicate with his family.

*Mordechai Vanunu, an Israeli former nuclear technician, has been serving an 18-year sentence of imprisonment in solitary confinement in Israel since October 1986.

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