

30/05/92

Distr:SC/PO

0001 hrs gmt Wednesday 4 March 1992

£TUNISIA:  
@THOUSANDS HELD ILLEGALLY, TORTURE ROUTINE  
IN CRACKDOWN ON ISLAMIC OPPOSITION

Thousands of suspected opponents in Tunisia have been arrested and held illegally as part of the government's repression of the Islamic opposition, with people cut off from the outside world for weeks or even months in detention centres where torture has become routine, Amnesty International said.

"The overwhelming impression is that the government itself is condoning these widespread human rights violations," Amnesty International said.

Most of the thousands of people held were suspected members of the Islamic organization al-Nahda. "At least 8,000 suspected supporters of al-Nahda have been arrested in the last 18 months," said Amnesty International. "The government has accused al-Nahda of plotting to overthrow the state and of being implicated in acts of violence which have taken place in Tunisia. However, most of the 8,000 suspected supporters of al-Nahda were jailed simply for their alleged membership of the organization, many were held illegally, cut off for weeks or months from contact with the outside world. Worse still, many were tortured viciously."

What safeguards there are in Tunisia are routinely flouted where suspected al-Nahda sympathisers are concerned. "Police officers have systematically falsified the dates of arrest. Complaints have been ignored or torn up. There are numerous reports that torture is carried out even within the building of the Ministry of the Interior," Amnesty International said.

Incommunicado detention is allowed for a maximum of 10 days under Tunisian law - but in practice, that law is ignored. People have been held incommunicado for up to five months and police records are falsified to hide the extent of the illegal detentions.

"What this means is that for weeks on end, families go round offices or from one police station to another, searching for news of relatives who have been arrested," said Amnesty International. "But wherever they go, they run into a wall of silence."

Incommunicado detention provides a safe cover for torture. "People held without access to family, lawyers or medical help are being routinely tortured in Tunisia - then held for days or weeks longer to allow their scars to heal before they are finally taken to court or released," said Amnesty International.

The human rights organization has more than 200 testimonies of torture, from former detainees, families, doctors and eye-witnesses and believes that many of the thousands arrested over the past year have suffered torture or severe ill-treatment.

The most common torture methods include the so-called poulet rôti, or roast chicken. The victim is trussed up and tied to a pole like a chicken on a spit, before being beaten. Other torture techniques include beatings on the soles of the feet, electric shocks, and insertion of a bottle into the rectum. Women have been sexually abused by being partially or wholly undressed and fondled by police guards.

Sometimes, the torture is so severe, it ends in death. At least seven people died in custody during a period of seven months last year, in circumstances that lead Amnesty International to believe that torture was to blame. Since then a further four detainees have died in custody in suspicious circumstances.

In one case, a 25-year-old student who was a well-known member of al-Nahda and the banned Islamist student union apparently died after being taken into custody at Nabeul Police Station. His family were told that Faisal Barakat had died in a road accident - but eyewitnesses say they saw him in the police station before his death, and that he had obviously been tortured.

About 30 people in the police station heard the noise of beating and screaming for four or five hours. Afterwards Faisal Barakat's body, apparently lifeless, was thrown out of the torture room, contorted in the poulet rôti position. Doctors were summoned half an hour later and several days later fellow detainees were told Faisal Barakat was dead.

Torture and illegal detention of suspected al-Nahda supporters now seems to be routine, according to the report. "Not only does the government do little to stop it," said Amnesty International, "it looks disturbingly as though the government is actually encouraging it."

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT WEDNESDAY 4 MARCH 1992