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ISRAEL AND THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR END TO SYSTEMATIC TORTURE OR ILL-TREATMENT OF DETAINEES

Amnesty International today calls on the Israeli Government to urgently implement specific measures to stop the systematic torture or ill-treatment of detainees in Israeli army, intelligence and police custody.

On Monday 25 April, the United Nations (UN) Committee against Torture, a 10 member body of experts set up to monitor the implementation of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, will be examining Israel's initial report submitted under the Convention. The report, due in November 1992, was only received by the Committee in February 1994. Israel ratified the Convention in October 1991.

Amnesty International is particularly disturbed by secret guidelines for interrogation by the General Security Service (GSS), which allow "the exertion of a moderate measure of physical pressure" as official policy. The Landau Commission of Inquiry, which first drew up such guidelines in October 1987, stressed in its public report that "the pressure must never reach the level of physical torture or maltreatment of the suspect or grievous harm to his honour which deprives him of his human dignity". However, it clearly endorsed "slapping a suspect's face, or threatening him".

"We believe that either the official guidelines for interrogation ultimately endorse torture or ill-treatment, or Israeli officials have extensively violated such guidelines with impunity. Either way urgent measures of redress are needed", said Amnesty International.

Thousands of detainees are arrested and held on security grounds every year in Israel and the Occupied Territories and most are subjected to methods of interrogation amounting to torture or ill-treatment. The Israeli army, the GSS and the police have all been responsible and medical personnel have apparently cooperated.

Methods include hooding with dirty sacks and prolonged sleep deprivation, usually achieved by subjecting detainees to various forms of "position abuse": for example, being bound to a child-size chair or forced to stand handcuffed to a wall or tied up in some other painful position for prolonged periods. Other reported methods include beatings all over the body, sometimes concentrated on sensitive areas such as the genitals, and prolonged confinement in closet-sized dark cells.

An Amnesty International report, published this month and presented to the UN Committee against Torture, details seven people's experiences of interrogation. Five died in circumstances in which torture appears to have caused or contributed to their deaths, along with medical negligence.

The risk of torture of detainees in the Occupied Territories is heightened by the practice of prolonged incommunicado detention. Unlike in Israel where safeguards for detainees are stronger, in the Occupied Territories adult political detainees accused of serious offenses are normally held without access to a judge for the legal maximum of 18 days. They are denied access to lawyers and relatives for longer periods, usually until the interrogation is over.

In 1991 at least two official investigations into allegations of maltreatment of detainees were carried out by the army, the GSS and the Ministry of Justice. Although the authorities indicated that as a result measures were taken against some interrogators, the proceedings of these investigations and their specific findings remain shrouded in secrecy.

In February this year new legislation was passed, according to which complaints against the GSS are to be investigated either by the police or by a unit within the Ministry of Justice. So far, investigations of individual complaints of torture or ill-treatment have failed to satisfy international standards. They are slow, conducted in secrecy and their methods and full results are not made public.

Amnesty International recommends nine measures to the Israeli Government for the introduction of safeguards against torture or ill-treatment, including: prompt access to judges, lawyers, doctors and relatives; the prohibition of any form of "physical pressure" or other coercion; the effective investigation of allegations of torture; and the full implementation of the Convention against Torture.

"While the peace process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) develops, the human rights situation in Israel and the Occupied territories should remain under close scrutiny," said Amnesty International. "Respect for human rights is fundamental for any just and lasting peace, therefore the meeting of the UN Committee against Torture to examine Israel's record on the treatment of detainees is particularly timely."

Amnesty International's report is entitled, Israel and the Occupied Territories: Torture and ill-treatment of political detainees, AI Index: MDE 15/03/94.

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