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## **Men, women and children tortured to confess to crimes in Mauritania**

Police in Mauritania are using torture to coerce men, women and children to confess to crimes while in custody, Amnesty International said after a 10-day research mission.

The delegation in Mauritania interviewed around 60 detainees, including women and children, held in three prisons in the capital, Nouakchott.

“Prisoners, including men held on ordinary and terrorism-related charges, spoke to us about the torture they had faced while in police custody. Many had been tried in grossly unfair procedures and some were subjected to enforced disappearance,” said Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada English Branch, who was part of the delegation.

Eleven children told Amnesty International’s delegates they had been tortured in police stations, including at the Brigade des Jeunes, a police post in Mauritania’s capital with a specific mandate to deal with juvenile offenders.

A 16-year-old boy said: “They made me sit on the ground in a crouch position. They attached one of my hands with my foot with handcuffs and then did the same with my other foot and my other hand. They put a stick under my knees and put the stick between two water containers. That lifted me into the air and my head swung down towards the ground. They started beating my head with their batons. I lost consciousness three times.”

While the concerns about torture arise primarily in police custody, Amnesty International also documented troubling instances of torture in prisons, including a case in which a man died after being tortured at Dar Naïm Prison in December 2012.

Two prisoners who were present at the time told the organization how they, too, were tortured:

“For three days we were held in punishment cells that were so small, we could not even extend our arms or legs. There were bugs everywhere. Every night after midnight we were taken out into a field. We were made to lie on our back and they forced water into our mouths and noses. Then they pushed on our chests with their boots and forced the water back out through our mouths and nostrils. We were made to eat sand. They beat us with electric cables after rubbing salt on our bodies. We were burned with heated knives. Our hands and ankles were cuffed behind our backs and we were beaten. After three nights of this torture, Hassan Ibrahim died.”

“In Mauritania, there’s a terrifying pattern of abuse when it comes to terrorism-related cases: individuals are arrested, prevented from speaking to a lawyer, tortured into confessing to a crime and taken to short and summary trials where confessions are used as the main evidence. How can that be called justice?” said Neve.

In the Central Prison of Nouakchott, Amnesty International met a 41-year-old Malian refugee who has been held without trial since being arrested on terrorism-related charges upon his entry into Mauritania. He said: “They stripped me down to my underwear and blindfolded me. They made me lie on the ground. One officer put his knee on my back and another tied my hands up to my feet. He did it so tightly that my two feet were touching my head. Then they put a baton in a knot in the cord and they wound it up tight. Then they lifted me in the air and let it unwind. They were hitting me with their batons, palms of their hands and kicking me while I spun around. They did this two times, the first time between 7pm and 1 am, the second time between 5 pm and 1 am.”

Once individuals “confess” to a crime, they are not allowed to read their statement before signing it. Confessions are usually used as the main – very often the only – evidence during trial. Even though many of the prisoners Amnesty International spoke to had complained to the courts that they had been tortured, no investigations are ever carried out into such allegations.

“Many prisoners found that trying to assert their rights during interrogations was what prompted the torture,” said Neve.

“Aaron Yoon, a 24-year-old Canadian sentenced to a three-year term on terrorism-related charges told us that when he asked, in broken Arabic, for a lawyer and a translator, the police began to torture him. The torture only ended when he stopped asking and agreed to sign their statement.”

Trials on terrorism-related offences are usually short and summary.

As one prisoner told Amnesty International: “It was not a trial. They simply read out what I had agreed to after being tortured. They asked if it was true. I said it was not and that I had been tortured. They pretended that I had said nothing. They said this is the police statement so this is what we will use. And I was sentenced to three years in prison.”

While in Mauritania, Amnesty International’s delegates also raised questions about the fate and whereabouts of 14 individuals who “disappeared” from Nouakchott’s Central Prison in May 2011. More than two years since their arrest, the authorities continue to refuse to disclose where they are being held or to allow the men access to their family or lawyers.

Already suffering because they have no news about their fathers, the children of the disappeared men are themselves directly affected. They are unable to register in public school and health care because their fathers have not properly been included in the current census.

“Abuses in Mauritania must come to an end. Authorities must investigate all reports of torture and abuse and implement the recommendations recently presented by the UN Committee against Torture,” said Neve.