

AI Index: PRE 01/338/2011
06 July 2011

Report reveals crimes against humanity in Syrian town

The brutal methods used in a devastating Syrian security operation in the western town of Tell Kalakh may constitute crimes against humanity, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

Crackdown in Syria: Terror in Tell Kalakh documents deaths in custody, torture and arbitrary detention that took place in May when Syrian army and security forces mounted a broad security sweep, lasting less than a week, against residents of the town near the Lebanese border.

“The accounts we have heard from witnesses to events in Tell Kalakh paint a deeply disturbing picture of systematic, targeted abuses to crush dissent,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director.

“Most of the crimes described in this report would fall within the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. But the UN Security Council must first refer the situation in Syria to the Court’s Prosecutor.”

The paper’s findings are based on interviews carried out in Lebanon and by phone with more than 50 people in May and June. Amnesty International has not been allowed to enter Syria.

The operation began on 14 May when the army and security forces entered Tell Kalakh following a demonstration calling for the downfall of the regime.

At least one person, 24-year-old 'Ali al-Basha was killed on that first day, apparently by snipers, and even the ambulance carrying his body came under fire. As many tried to leave, Syrian forces fired on fleeing families.

The following days saw scores of male residents, including some aged over 60 and boys aged less than 18 years, rounded up and detained. Every family from Tell Kalakh that Amnesty International met in Lebanon said they had at least one relative in detention.

Most of those detained were tortured, some even as they were being arrested, according to accounts. In one incident, soldiers transporting detainees counted how many they had arrested by stabbing lit cigarettes on the backs of their necks.

Detainees told Amnesty International that Military Security, one of the security forces which detained people, used the shabah (ghost) method, where the detainee is forced into a stress position for long periods and beaten, in these cases by being tied by the wrists to a bar high enough off the ground to force the detainee to stand on the tip of their toes.

Twenty year-old “Mahmoud”, who was arrested on 16 May and released after nearly a month in

detention, was held for around five days at the Military Security detention facility in Homs:

“Each day [was] the same story. They tied me up in the shabah position and applied electricity to my body and testicles. Sometimes I screamed very loudly and begged the interrogator to stop. He didn’t care.”

At least nine people died in custody after being arrested during the security operation in Tell Kalakh, according to witnesses. Eight of these men – some of whom had been active in demonstrations – were shot at and wounded as they were ordered out of a house, and were then taken away by soldiers.

It was only around two weeks later that relatives were told to go to a military hospital to identify the bodies of the eight men. Witnesses said the bodies had marks on them which suggested torture, including cuts to the chest, long vertical slashes on the thighs and what seemed to be gunshot wounds on the back of the legs.

A forensic pathologist analysed a photograph of one of the men, 'Abd al-Rahman Abu Libdeh, for Amnesty International and concluded that he seemed to have sustained violent injuries to the face, shoulders and neck while still alive.

Some of the family members who went to identify the bodies of their sons said they were forced to sign a document stating that their sons were killed by armed gangs.

Amnesty International knows that a number of people arrested during the security operation in Tell Kalakh still remain in detention, including a 17-year-old boy.

The organization called on the Syrian authorities to release all those arbitrarily arrested and those detained for taking part in peaceful demonstrations or expressing views of dissent, including children.

Amnesty International considers that crimes committed in Tell Kalakh amount to crimes against humanity as they appear to be part of a widespread, as well as systematic, attack against the civilian population.

Amnesty International reiterated its call on the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. It also urged the Syrian authorities to provide unimpeded access to UN investigators currently looking into the human rights situation in Syria.

”The willingness of the international community to take action on Libya in the name of human rights has highlighted its double standards on Syria,” said Philip Luther.

“Despite President Bashar al-Assad’s talk of reform, there is little evidence so far that the Syrian authorities will respond to anything but concrete international measures.”