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Libya: Prison records at risk of being lost

Key prison records and other documentation are at risk of being lost as sites remain unsecure and documents destroyed or taken away in Libya, Amnesty International warned today.

The Transitional National Council (NTC) authorities must protect such evidence where it is found or collect it in a central repository for safe-keeping. They should also appeal to those individuals who have taken any such documents to return them to the authorities as soon as possible.

"Prison records and other physical evidence may be critical for any forthcoming trials for crimes committed under the rule of Colonel Mu'ammar al-Gaddafi," said Claudio Cordone, Senior Director at Amnesty International.

"In addition, they could help shedding light on the fate of the many prisoners who have 'disappeared' in Libyan prisons in the last few decades, including many thousands taken prisoner by pro-al-Gaddafi forces since the beginning of the uprising."

When Amnesty International visited Abu Salim Prison on 28 August, it found documents scattered on the ground in the courtyard of the prison, and in bags stored inside at least two rooms.

Among the documents on the ground were case files of prisoners held for zandaqa (heresy), the "offence" for which many opponents of Colonel al-Gaddafi were convicted for; a document ordering the expulsion of a Somali woman who was HIV positive; and a case of a Libyan accused of terrorist attacks in Iraq.

Amnesty International researchers saw visitors sifting through the papers in Abu Salim Prison. Some were taking files away with them "for memory" as souvenirs, despite objections by relatives of a man who was killed in Abu Salim in June 1996, when some 1,200 people were killed in the prison. There were no guards and no one who seemed to be in charge.

"The coming days are going to be critical for the preservation of evidence found in prisons, military camps and even private residences of former leaders," said Claudio Cordone. "All efforts must be done to secure it so that the truth can be established and those responsible for abuses held to account".