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Nigeria: Deaths of hundreds of Boko Haram suspects in custody requires investigation

The deaths of hundreds of people in detention facilities run by Nigeria's military Joint Task Force (JTF) must be investigated as a matter of urgency, Amnesty International said today.

Amnesty International has received credible information from a senior officer in the Nigerian Army that over 950 people died in military custody in the first six months of 2013 alone. Most of the reported deaths occurred in facilities used by the military to detain people suspected of being members of or associated with the armed Islamist group Boko Haram.

"The evidence we've gathered suggests that hundreds of people died in military custody in 2013 alone. This is a staggeringly high figure that requires urgent action by the Nigerian government," said Lucy Freeman, Amnesty International's deputy Africa director.

"The details of what happens behind locked doors in these shadowy detention facilities must be exposed, and those responsible for any human rights violations brought to book."

A large proportion of these deaths are reported to have happened in Giwa military barracks, Maiduguri in Borno State and Sector Alpha, commonly referred to as 'Guantanamo' and Presidential Lodge (known as 'Guardroom') in Damaturu, Yobe State.

According to former detainees interviewed by Amnesty International, people died on an almost daily basis in both Giwa and Sector Alpha from suffocation or other injuries due to overcrowding, and starvation. Some suffered serious injuries due to severe beating and eventually died in detention due to lack of medical attention and treatment.

These interviews also revealed that in some cases detainees in these facilities may have been extrajudicially executed. Some described soldiers taking detainees from their cells threatening to shoot and kill them. In many cases the detainees never returned. Others were reportedly shot in the leg during interrogation, provided no medical care and left to bleed to death.

Another senior officer in the Nigerian Army who spoke on condition of anonymity told Amnesty International:

"Hundreds have been killed in detention either by shooting them or by suffocation... There are times when people are brought out on a daily basis and killed. About five people, on average, are killed nearly on a daily basis."

In April 2013 Amnesty International delegates counted 20 emaciated corpses lying on the ground in the compound of the State Specialist Hospital mortuary in Maiduguri. Eye witnesses said that the bodies had been deposited by the JTF. Several other sources told Amnesty International that the same mortuary

received a daily delivery of bodies by the JTF. They reportedly remain there until the mortuary is full and are then taken away for burial by Borno State Environmental Protection Agency (BOSEPA). Information received by Amnesty International indicates that post-mortem examinations are not carried out at the mortuary or elsewhere.

“International standards, as well as Nigerian laws, require that deaths in custody must be investigated thoroughly and impartially,” said Lucy Freeman. “Detainees have human rights and these must be respected in all instances.”

In many parts of northern Nigeria hundreds of people accused of having links to Boko Haram have been arbitrarily detained by the JTF. Many have been detained incommunicado for lengthy periods without charge or trial, without being brought before any judicial authority, and without access to lawyers and families.