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Reports of prison abuse in South Africa must lead to urgent investigation

Allegations of abuse, including the use of electric shocks, against inmates in a privately run prison in South Africa raise serious questions about the authorities' real commitment to tackle torture and other ill-treatment, Amnesty International said.

“Unfortunately, these recent allegations of abuse against inmates in South Africa’s Mangaung prison are consistent with a long-standing pattern across the country, including disturbing levels of impunity for human rights abuses within South Africa’s prisons,” said Mary Rayner, South Africa researcher at Amnesty International.

“That the South African authorities have reportedly launched an official investigation into the allegations is positive. The question now is whether they will actually bring those responsible to justice and provide full reparations to victims, as opposed to what has happened too many times in the past.”

Amnesty International will continue to monitor the follow-up to these investigations.

“Any investigation into the alleged abuses must be prompt, impartial and independent,” said Mary Rayner.

Inmates at Mangaung’s high-security prison, in Free State province, have alleged that staff from G4S, a UK private security firm which until recently ran the facility, subjected them to electric shocks and beatings, amongst other abuses. On 9 October, the South African authorities took control of the prison because of a range of problems within the facility.

“Even if they had not taken control of this prison, the South African authorities are directly responsible for what happens in this and all places of detention,” said Mary Rayner.

Amnesty International has highlighted the widespread impunity for torture and ill-treatment in South Africa for many years.

“These new allegations highlight the urgent need for progress on establishing an effective investigative mechanism with 24-hour access without notice to all prisons and other places of detention. Such a body critically would strengthen the impact of the existing Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services,” said Mary Rayner.

In July this year the President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, signed into law the Prevention and Combating of Torture Act 2013. Amnesty International welcomed that development and urges the government to seize this moment and implement its international and domestic obligations to prevent, investigate and bring to justice perpetrators of torture.

G4S have reportedly said they are launching their own investigation into the recent allegations of prisoner abuse.