

UPDATE BASED ON GOOD NEWS

Text in red and comments for translators – please do not translate these, but leave (in English) in the translated document so we can easily identify parts of the document.

[Title]

Syria: A culture oppressed – the torture and imprisonment of Syrian Kurds

[Extract]

There have been no official investigations into violent events in March 2004, in which at least 30 Kurds were killed, over two thousand arrested, and many reportedly tortured. Syrian Kurds suffer from identity-based discrimination, including severe restrictions on Kurdish language and culture.

[Images and captions]



Khayri Berjes Jando, who reportedly died following prolonged beating by at least one army officer while doing military service in March 2004.

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Demonstration outside UNICEF building, Damascus, calling for recognition of Syrian Kurdish children's rights, July 2003.

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[Action]

There have been no official investigations into violent events in March 2004, in which at least 30 Kurds were killed, over two thousand arrested, and many reportedly tortured. On 31 March 2005 Amnesty International welcomed the news that 312 Syrian Kurds were to be released, reportedly all the Kurds that remained in detention following the March 2004 events (further information) [\[link to MDE 24/011/2005\]](#)

[new paragraph] Syrian Kurds suffer from identity-based discrimination, including severe restrictions on Kurdish language and culture. More than 200,000 Kurdish people in Syria are denied nationality, and have restricted access to basic rights. Kurdish human rights defenders are at risk of arrest, torture and ill-treatment, and unfair trial and imprisonment.

Amnesty International calls on the Syrian government to investigate the events of March 2004 and all allegations of torture and abuse in custody. The Syrian government should lift restrictions on Kurdish culture and liberties and end the prohibitions imposed on Kurdish people living in Syria.

[Call to action]

Urge the Syrian authorities to investigate these reports of torture and unlawful killings, to appeal legislation that discriminates against Kurds, and amend legislation on nationality so as to find a solution to those who are stateless.

[Background]

A culture oppressed

Even though nearly a tenth of the Syrian population is Kurdish, they're not allowed to be taught in their own language. There are laws against publishing in Kurdish and playing Kurdish music. People who celebrate Kurdish cultural events – like *Nawruz*, the Kurdish New Year – risk going to prison. In some state institutions, there are laws against even talking in Kurdish.

More than 200,000 Kurdish people in Syria are denied a nationality and passport. These stateless Kurds are denied some basic economic and social rights. They aren't allowed to own a house, land, or a business. They can't work as lawyers, journalists, engineers or doctors. Many are not allowed to study in school after the age of 14, and often they're not allowed treatment in state hospitals.

The violent events of March 2004

Security forces reportedly fired live bullets into the Kurdish section of the crowd when tensions rose between rival Arab and Kurdish fans during a football match in

March 2004, in the north-eastern town of Qamishli. Several people were killed. The next day, police officers opened fire on a funeral procession for Kurds killed the previous day. Subsequent protests and riots across the Kurdish-populated areas resulted in the deaths of over 30 Kurdish people and one police officer. Exact numbers of dead and injured are not known, as there has been no government investigation into the events at the stadium, funeral or subsequent protests. At the end of March 2005, the Syrian government announced plans to release 312 Kurds, reportedly all those who remained in detention following the March 2004 events.

More than 2,000 Kurds were arrested following these events hundreds of whom were released throughout the year. Most were held incommunicado at unknown locations, and there were widespread reports of torture and ill-treatment of detainees, including children as young as twelve, teenage girls, women and the elderly. The reports of torture are not known to have been investigated.

Neither have there been investigations into the deaths of five Kurds, who reportedly died after being tortured and ill-treated in custody. The body of one of them was delivered to his family with scars of torture, head injuries, and bruises on his neck, feet and back.

Hope for the future

Amnesty International has welcomed the reports of the release of 312 Syrian Kurds and continues to call upon the Syrian government to investigate the events of March 2004 and all allegations of torture and abuse in custody. The Syrian government should lift restrictions on Kurdish culture and end the prohibitions imposed on Kurdish people living in Syria.

Please join our appeal – take action today!

[Sample letter]

Your Excellency,

I am writing to you to express my concern about human rights violations against the Kurds in Syria, including widespread reports of torture and severe restrictions on Kurdish culture. I would also like to note the very positive news at the end of March 2005 in which the Syrian Government announced the release of 312 Syrian Kurds arrested following the violent events of March 2004.

At the same time I urge the authorities to investigate the reports of torture and ill-treatment of Kurds – as well as other Syrians – in detention. People reportedly tortured include children as young as twelve, teenage girls, women and the elderly. Five Kurds apparently died after being tortured and ill-treated in custody. Six Kurdish conscripts died under suspicious circumstances. More than 30 Kurds were killed during the violent events in March 2004. None of these events are known to have been investigated.

I urge the Syrian authorities to investigate these reports of torture and unlawful killings.

I am also concerned that there are severe restrictions on the Kurds practicing their language and culture.

I ask your government to allow Syrian Kurds to study Kurdish and to be taught in their own language. I ask your government to lift restrictions on publishing Kurdish materials, celebrating Kurdish cultural events, and registering Kurdish names and businesses.

I am also concerned about the restrictions on the stateless Kurds, who are denied access to some of the most basic rights, including equal access to education and health care, and to property rights.

I urge your government to amend legislation on nationality so as to find a solution to the statelessness of those who have been denied nationality.

Yours sincerely,

[Target details]

His Excellency Bashar al-Assad
President
Presidential Palace
Abu Rummaneh
al-Rashid Street
Damascus
Syrian Arab Republic
Fax: + 963 11 332 3410

His Excellency General Ghazi Kan'an
Minister of Interior
Ministry of Interior
Merjeh Circle
Damascus
Syrian Arab Republic
Fax + 963 11 222 3428
Email: somi@net.sy