

Myanmar: The institution of torture

Torture has become an institution in Myanmar, used throughout the country on a regular basis, Amnesty International said today in a new report. Police and the army continue to use torture to extract information, punish, humiliate and control the population.

"Torture is employed as an instrument by the authorities to keep the population living in a state of fear," the organization said.

The victims of torture in Myanmar are political activists, criminal prisoners and members of ethnic minorities. Torture has been reported for over four decades yet the methods of torture have remained constant.

Torture techniques include: the "iron road", rolling an iron up and down the shins until the skin peels off; "the helicopter", being suspended from the ceiling and spun around while being beaten;"*Taik Peik*", spending weeks or months in tiny brick cells with little air or light; "*ponsan*", being forced to maintain difficult positions for prolonged periods.

Political prisoners, believed to number around 1700, are at risk of torture during the initial phases of detention. Activists from the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party which overwhelmingly won the 1990 elections, are frequently the targets of torture and ill-treatment. Hundreds of its members are imprisoned and tens of thousands have been forced to resign from the party.

Student activists who have been at the forefront of the pro-democracy movement are also often tortured in detention. Freedom of expression and assembly is almost completely denied to all.

One 23-year-old former political activist was arrested twice during the 1990s, the first time when he was just 14. After his second arrest he was forced to stand on his tiptoes with a pin under his heel and kneel on sharp stones for prolonged periods. At Military Intelligence 12 headquarters he was also subjected to the "ponsan" technique. He told Amnesty International that he was interrogated non-stop by rotating teams of Military Intelligence personnel. He said "MI quarrelled amongst themselves - they were afraid I was going to die on them."

Hundreds, perhaps thousands of criminal prisoners have died in labour camps where they are forced to work under torturous conditions building roads and breaking up stones. The authorities openly admit that "the debt of crime will be repaid with sweat".

Members of ethnic groups such as the Shan, Karen and Karenni, who live in areas of conflict, are seized, interrogated and tortured to extract information on the whereabouts of armed ethnic minority groups. Men, women and children also face torture when they are taken by the Myanmar Army and forced to carry heavy supplies as porters for days or weeks at a time or forced to work on construction projects such as roads, railways and dams.

A Karenni Christian farmer from Kayah state was arrested by the army and accused of working for an armed opposition group after a battle in February 2000. He reported; "Three soldiers beat me with rifle butts on my head and punched my face. I got cut on my head and blood was running down from my nose. When I fell down, they kicked me with military boots. My hearing is still bad..." He was forced to accompany troops as a guide for one week during which time he was beaten every day with sticks and tied with a rope. He finally escaped,

and after returning to his village he hid with his family in the jungle for two weeks before fleeing to Thailand.

Women who are taken as porters are vulnerable to rape by soldiers. Amnesty International was told about the rape and murder of a 12-year-old girl, Naw Po Thu in October 1998. She was allegedly raped by a major and managed to escape, but was recaptured, raped again and then shot dead through the vagina. The major gave the girl's family one sack of rice, a measure of sugar, a tin of condensed milk and a small amount of money as compensation.

"Torture is used in a variety of settings in Myanmar but the objectives are always the same -- repression and control," the organization said.

The military government denies torture exists, stating that it is illegal in domestic law. Amnesty International urges the Myanmar government to issue clear orders to all security forces to adhere to this law and immediately stop the practice of torture. It should also investigate all allegations of torture, bring perpetrators to justice, and prohibit incommunicado detention which facilitates the practice.

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