

AI INDEX: MDE/15/77/96

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE 0001 HRS GMT 2 DECEMBER 1996

PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY: HUMAN RIGHTS GUARANTEES SHOULD BE
IMPLEMENTED WITHOUT DELAY

A worrying increase in human rights violations by the Palestinian Authority over the past two years has been coupled with an emerging climate of fear and intimidation, Amnesty International said in a new report released today.

“Victims of brutal torture and other abuses are now afraid to speak out and give their names in the face of threats,” the human rights organization said.

“This is a fearsome indictment of a system which ignores the people who complain of abuse and threatens them with reprisals.”

In its report, Amnesty International describes the growing climate of fear where journalists who report abuses are arrested, their newspapers closed down and prominent human rights activists harassed.

“When Dr Iyad al-Sarraj -- a high profile leader of the very citizens’ rights commission set up by President Arafat -- is arrested three times, beaten up and brought to court on trumped-up charges, it is no wonder that people not internationally known are terrified of the security forces,” Amnesty International said.

Over the past two years, Amnesty International delegates, including medical personnel, visited the Palestinian Authority several times. In February 1996, the Secretary General of the organization, Pierre Sané, raised human rights issues with President Yasser Arafat and members of the Legislative Council.

In its report, Amnesty International documents human rights abuses committed by the 10 or so Palestinian security services in the areas under the Palestinian Authority’s jurisdiction. Arbitrary political arrest and prolonged detention without charge or trial of hundreds of suspected political opponents; widespread use of torture and unlawful killings; the failure to adequately investigate abuses and the arrest of journalists and human rights defenders who denounce them -- contributed to create a climate of disillusionment and fear.

Mass detentions of suspected opponents of the peace process have been carried out, in the context of international pressure by Israel and the United States of America, to clamp down on those responsible for violent attacks on Israeli citizens. While the Authority has a duty to bring to justice those who have committed violent acts, this should be done according to internationally recognized standards. There can be no justification for the use of torture and other serious human rights abuses.

The different police or security forces operate within and, on occasion, outside the areas under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority with minimal accountability. The different branches of the security forces appear frequently neither to coordinate nor even to communicate with each other. One former detainee told Amnesty International delegates: “*I was arrested twice*

and held by four different police forces without charge or trial. I said to the police chief, 'Where is the law?' He said, 'We are the law'."

The legal system has been marginalised and ignored as political detainees are held with no reference to any law. Orders by the Palestinian High Court of Justice to release detainees kept in prison for months without being charged or tried are ignored. Few of those arrested by security forces for political reasons now make any effort to appoint a lawyer, they know it will make no difference. The few trials of political detainees which have taken place, have been before the State Security Court, instituted by decree of President Arafat in February 1995.

"In these courts defendants are prosecuted, judged and even defended by officers in the security forces. This is a travesty of justice," Amnesty International said.

Torture of detainees has been widespread and, in some centres, systematic, especially after mass political arrests in March. The fact that political detainees are frequently held in incommunicado detention for weeks or even months encourages torture. Methods used include beatings while suspended, burnings, and pouring molten plastic on the body. One detainee, whose body and feet still showed the torture scars, told Amnesty International:

"The colonel said to the seven policemen 'Start'. They lay me on the floor and took my shoes off. Four of them had electric cables in their hands and they had taken off the plastic on one side so that the metal wires were exposed. They started to beat me on the feet and burned my skin with cigarettes."

Detainees in Gaza reported suffering prolonged sleep deprivation, while kept sitting or standing, heads covered with hoods -- the same torture methods which have been used on Palestinians by Israeli security forces, even down to the use of loud music blaring out 24 hours a day as a form of sensory abuse.

At least nine people have died in custody of the Palestinian security services in circumstances where torture appears to have caused or contributed to their deaths. In July and August 1996 three people died, apparently after torture. They include Mahmud Jumayel who died on 31 July after having been suspended, beaten and burnt with electric elements by the naval police in Jneid Prison, Nablus. Three members of the naval police were sentenced to up to 15 years' imprisonment after an unfair trial.

"The mockery of trials of the few members of the security forces who have been convicted of human rights abuse seems designed to cover up abuses they have committed rather than to redress them," Amnesty International said.

Positive moves since August include an agreement signed between the Palestinian Authority and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) authorizing it to visit all detainees and detention centres and statements by President Arafat that he "would not tolerate torture". But reports of people ill-treated or tortured, even in the offices of senior Palestinian security service officers, continue to be received.

The Amnesty International report also stresses the importance of the human rights monitoring role of the Legislative Council and Palestinian human rights organizations including the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights (PICCR). ENDS\