

0001 hrs gmt Wednesday 22 July 1992

ESYRIA-
@POLITICAL PRISONERS STILL DETAINED
AND TORTURED DESPITE MASS RELEASES

Thousands of political prisoners remain in Syrian jails, where many have been tortured and some have died, according to a report released by Amnesty International today.

Although some 2,000 prisoners were unexpectedly released at the end of last year and earlier this year, thousands of political prisoners remain in detention without trial. Hundreds of political suspects - including human rights activists - have since been arrested, and some are still being held. Ten human rights workers are serving prison terms of up to 10 years after unfair trials in March this year.

"Despite the welcome releases, nothing has been done to end the grave violations of political prisoners' rights which have persisted in Syria for nearly 30 years," says Amnesty International. "The presidential pardons granted in the last seven months do not redeem the country's record on human rights.

"We hoped earlier this year that Syria was beginning to right past wrongs and that international law would at last be respected. But despite recent releases, political suspects continue to be arrested. Despite the amnesties, prisoners of conscience remain locked up. Despite its official prohibition, torture is still rife. This has been the pattern of human rights violations for 30 years. Where is the change?"

Freed prisoners had been held under the state of emergency legislation, in force since 1963, which allows for the indefinite detention without charge or trial of anyone suspected of "endangering security and public order". Several thousand political suspects continue to be held under this legislation; some of them have been held for over two decades.

One former army officer, Ahmad Suwaidani, was arrested in 1969 and has since been held without ever being charged, as have 16 other officials of the former government arrested between 1970 and 1971. Dozens of doctors and engineers are still believed to be detained without trial since their arrest following a one-day strike more than 11 years ago. Hundreds of others are held without charge for suspected links with opposition parties. It appears others have been detained simply because they are related to someone in an opposition group.

Recently there have been reports that hundreds of prisoners of conscience held without charge for many years may soon be brought to trial. Amnesty International has written to the Syrian government asking for information and for authorization to attend any trials.

"Unfortunately, in our experience political trials are rare in Syria and when they are held they invariably fall short of international standards of fairness," said Amnesty International. In March this year Aktham Nu'aysa, a lawyer, was among ten human rights activists sentenced to prison terms of up to 10 years after an unfair trial. The trial proceedings were mainly held behind closed doors and the defendants were denied a proper defence and appeal against their conviction and sentences.

Some prisoners who have been formally tried and sent to jail have not been freed even when their sentences expired. Three men whose 15-year sentences were completed in 1985 were simply not released. All are still in prison, and all are reported to be ill.

Many political detainees are alleged to have been tortured or ill-treated. According to released prisoners, torture is routine, and includes beatings on the soles of the feet (falaga) and being hung from a suspended tyre and beaten with sticks (dullab). Torture usually takes place during prolonged periods of incommunicado detention, and is used both to extract information from political suspects and as a form of punishment.

Amnesty International is urging the Syrian government to establish an independent body to investigate torture and deaths in custody, to free immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience and to release other political detainees if they are not given prompt, fair trials. The human rights organisation added that the government should make it clear to security forces that torture is strictly prohibited and that its perpetrators will be brought to justice.

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT WEDNESDAY 22 JULY