

MOROCCO

@Tazmamert: Official Silence and Impunity

Introduction

One year after the release of the 30 surviving prisoners from the secret detention centre at Tazmamert, the Moroccan Government remains silent about the 33 prisoners who died in detention there. More than half of the prisoners held in total isolation in Tazmamert died from illnesses resulting from inadequate nutrition and hygiene, lack of medical care and neglect; most of them died years after their sentences had expired.

Those who survived the 18 years in inhuman conditions of detention were released between September and December 1991. They are all in extremely poor physical condition: a virtually total lack of light, no provision for any medical care or exercise and a grossly inadequate diet meant that they have suffered irreparable physical damage. Since their release they have been experiencing great difficulties in readjusting to everyday life after having been completely cut off from the outside world and from each other for 18 years. They remain under close surveillance by the Moroccan authorities and continue to be deprived of the medical care necessary to treat their illnesses from the years of detention in Tazmamert.

Amnesty International welcomes the fact that all the surviving detainees have been released from Tazmamert and given access to their families. However, the organization remains gravely concerned both that no independent inquiry has been held into the gross ill-treatment of prisoners in Tazmamert and that those released continue to be submitted to restrictions on their freedom of movement and communications. Amnesty International has repeatedly urged the government to initiate an independent inquiry to determine the circumstances and causes of the deaths of the 33 prisoners who died in Tazmamert, to inform their families fully of the causes and circumstances of death and to provide compensation.

Background

On the night of 7 August 1973, 58 military prisoners were taken from Kenitra Central Prison to Tazmamert, in the foothills of the Atlas mountains. There a secret detention centre comprising two buildings, each containing 29 individual cells, had been especially constructed for them beside a military barracks.

Those initially taken to Tazmamert were all members of the Moroccan armed forces who had been convicted of participating in coup attempts against King Hassan II in 1971 and 1972. They had been tried in two separate trials in 1972: in the first trial in February 1972, known as the "Skhirat Trial", 1,081 defendants were tried for allegedly participating in an attack on the royal palace of Skhirat on 10 July 1971 during celebrations for the King's birthday. Seventy-four were sentenced to prison terms ranging from one year to life imprisonment, and one was sentenced to death (the sentence was later commuted); the rest were acquitted. In the second trial in November 1972, known as the "Kenitra Trial", the 220 defendants were accused of attempting to kill King Hassan II by firing at his aircraft in August 1972 as he was returning to Morocco from France. Eleven of them were sentenced to death and executed shortly afterwards, 32 others were sentenced to between three years' and life imprisonment, and the rest were acquitted.

Convicted defendants from both groups were first held in Kenitra Military Prison and then in Kenitra Central Prison. Those sentenced to one or two-year prison terms were released on expiry of their sentence. Those who remained, serving prison sentences of three years or more, suddenly "disappeared" from the prison on the night of 7-8 August 1973. When their families went for the next weekly visit they were simply told that the prisoners were no longer there and not to look for them anymore. It was only one year later, when a prisoner's letter was smuggled out, that the families found out where and in what conditions the prisoners were being held.

The cells, which measured three meters by two, had no windows or light, only 14 small holes in the wall for ventilation. Inside, there was nothing but a stone platform serving as a bed. The prison was described as boiling hot in summer and freezing cold in winter and the prisoners, who had been taken there without any of their possessions or extra clothes at the height of summer, suffered greatly from the winter cold. The prisoners were given a plastic pitcher for the five litres of water they were allowed each day and one blanket each. For 18 years, they never left their cells, they never saw the sun, they were fed the bare minimum necessary to keep them alive and never received any medical care. Only one prisoner, Lieutenant Mbarek Touil, who was married to a United States citizen, was given exceptional treatment after the US Government intervened with the Moroccan authorities - he was allowed, after 1985, to sit in the courtyard during the day on some occasions.

The others remained in almost total darkness for 18 years. In the years after 1973 a small number of other "disappeared" - unacknowledged prisoners - were brought to Tazmamert to fill the cells of some of those who had died. A palace guard, Miloudi Seddik, was brought there in 1980 and died there six years later. Three brothers, Bayazid, Midhat and Ali Bourequat, residents of Morocco but of French nationality, who had been arrested in 1973 and held in secret centres ever since, were brought to Tazmamert in 1981. For six months from 1981 to 1982 15 detainees - of unknown nationality but apparently from sub-Saharan Africa - were held there; reportedly they spoke no French and no one knew why

they were there. One was a Catholic, the rest were Muslims. One died in Tazmamert and his companions carried his body when they were taken away.

Those who died in Tazmamert

The first detainee to die in Tazmamert was Lieutenant Mohamed Chemsî; he died on 22 April 1974. Sergeant Mohammed Kenatte died on 1 December 1974, after suffering gastro-intestinal problems for some time.

By that time the prisoners had realised the apparent purpose of Tazmamert: perpetual imprisonment, cut off from the outside world, in conditions which would lead to a slow and painful death. A letter smuggled out of Tazmamert in 1980 says:

" In July 1974 two comrades finished their sentences and when they were not released as expected one of them complained. 'How long did you get?' the jailer asked him. 'Three years'. 'Do not say three, say forever' replied the guard..."

Over the years the prisoners in one of the buildings managed, with the help of one or two guards, to smuggle out letters - sometimes once a year, sometimes less often - to their families. Sometimes written on thin paper two or three centimetres square the letters describe the conditions and contain urgent requests for aid:

"I have rheumatism, I am constantly lying down, I suffer from chronic bronchitis (my lungs) and muscular fatigue and my heart is weak..."

"Invite the messenger in, get food ready, keep him as long as possible so that you can prepare what I need ... in addition to money send me medicine, Cortisone (pills) ... get hold of whatever you can, fortifiers - vitamins - antibiotics - ... aspirin..."

Those who were in contact through smuggled letters with their families were in Building 1, which was slightly higher than Building 2 and less damp. Those who received medicines and vitamin pills shared part of them with their fellow-prisoners. Of the 29 confined there, nine died between 1977 and 1990. There was no contact between the prisoners in the two buildings except that seven detainees were moved from Building 2 to Building 1, and after some time three of them, Achour Ghani, Hamid Bendourou and Abdellah Lafraoui, were moved back to Building 2. In Building 2, where there were no letters smuggled out or in and no medicines, 24 died between 1974 and 1991.

Letters from some of the Tazmamert detainees described the conditions of detention and the despair of the detainees who heard their fellow-prisoners die. Another letter smuggled out of Tazmamert in 1980 says:

"...A comrade who was in excellent health told us that his nose was bleeding heavily; later he told us that his legs could not support him. On his own he could not go to the door to take his food any more and was relieving himself on his rags. The jailers only opened and closed the door, they did not care if he was eating or not. The comrade was brave and every day he kept us informed about his state, his morale was good. He became partially then totally paralysed, later his delirium made us share with him nightmarish nights. When he breathed his last the guards came into the cells with masks on, because of the smell, and took his rags off and buried him without any religious ceremony in the yard. We learned that it was 25 October 1977. Through an unexpected transfer of some of the comrades to the other building we learned that by that date six people had already died..."

The detainee who had died was Sergeant Mohamed Chajai, who had been sentenced to three years' imprisonment and should have been released in 1975. By 1979 15 prisoners had already died. The dead were all buried in the courtyard; the bodies were placed in a pit and quick lime was poured over them to hasten the decomposition process. Their blankets, in tattered rags and stinking, were given to the other prisoners. A letter written in 1979 says:

"...My health is poor. I have lost my teeth, my stomach is wracked, I urinate more than 12 times a day and eczema is eating my entire body. Do not worry, I do not fear death, I only pray that it may come gently, within the norms of Islam..."

"...Some are constantly lying down, other walk on all fours. Bones are disintegrating, skins are dessicating. If you knew..."

"...The prisoner agonizes, alone, then he dies slowly with no one to bring him a glass of water... the walls of Tazmamert hide the most horrible secrets known to humanity..."

Another letter written in 1980 says:

"...As long as the detainee can stay upright it is still bearable. When he can't, it is practically a death warrant. He stays lying down... he doesn't receive any care. The jailers don't go near him and forbid us to help him. They just leave his meagre diet and water ration in his cell and shut the door. The days pass while he slowly sinks into death... the horror gets worse when he starts to fulfil his needs just where he is, on himself, and falls into a delirium, as terrible for him as it is for us, lasting days or weeks till he gives up the ghost... Those who are still alive are in a very serious state. Some lost their reason years ago."

In 1981 the guards in Building 2 apparently received orders to empty some of the cells to prepare for the arrival of some more detainees and for a time some of the prisoners were

held two to a cell. One of the Tazmamert detainees told of the death of two of the prisoners who had been ill for a long time:

"He was in the cell next door. For years he had been hoping to be released; he kept standing by the door of his cell so that he would be the first one to see those who would come to release them. Exceptionally the guards put him into a cell with another who was also very ill. After agonizing in an almost constant coma his companion, who was lying on the stone platform serving as a bed, fell onto the floor on top of him and remained in his arms all night without moving. He could not move and asked the other detainees what to do; the other detainees shouted to him from the other cells to feel the other's pulse and nostrils to see if he was still breathing. But the body grew cold and he realized that he was dead. The guards came in with mint leaves in their nostrils to fight the smell and took the dead man away. He said that the smell of his companion's death would not leave him and he stopped eating. We all tried to encourage him. The food was disgusting and inedible but we kept shouting to him: "Have you tasted the vermicelli tonight - I tell you it was so delicious I couldn't put it down" and such things. But he couldn't eat. He died two months later. This wait destroyed him. Others, like him, could not accept the conditions in which they lived and lost their minds before dying."

Some prisoners could not bear the conditions of detention and went out of their minds. One, after 18 years of darkness and isolation, committed suicide. Mimoun Fagouri hanged himself on 1 June 1990, fifteen years after the expiry of his sentence. He had been asking his companions how he could kill himself; they tried to dissuade him. The guards had been digging a pit in the courtyard which they told the detainees was for electrical cables. The detainees knew that these pits were usually dug to bury the next dead, and the other detainees say that this had a bad effect on Mimoun. Eventually, he called to those in neighbouring cells: "I am weary. The only way out of Tazmamert is by death". After he died the guards came to take him away and buried him in the courtyard in the pit they had previously dug. One of the detainees said to a guard: "So this is the first bit of electrical cable to go down in the pit". The guard did not answer.

One prisoner died from a scorpion bite. Others died delirious and in fever. One woke up paralysed, his knees bent up to his chin. The guards entered the cell and tried to straighten him, but in vain. He remained like that until his death, years later. Hamid Bendourou was the last to die in Tazmamert, on 5 March 1991, bringing to 33 the number of those who died there. He was in Building 2, and used to recite the Qur'an aloud in his cell every Friday - the Sura (Chapter) Ahl al-Kahf (The People of the Cave). For two weeks in February the other prisoners heard nothing and suspected that he was in a coma. On 1 March they heard him once more recite the Qur'an; a few days later he was dead. He had been sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment and should have been released in 1981. For most of those who died in Tazmamert it is not possible to know the causes of their death

because none of them were ever seen by a doctor during the 18 years they spent there. The only details available are from the prisoners' letters smuggled out of Tazmamert, or from other prisoners who heard their inmates' complaints through the cells' walls.

Amnesty International's previous action on behalf of the "disappeared" of Tazmamert

Over the years Amnesty International had repeatedly sought information from the Moroccan Government about the reasons for the continued imprisonment of these prisoners, and expressed grave concern at their conditions of detention. The government, however, consistently refused to clarify the situation of the prisoners or to take any action to halt the gross violations of their basic human rights. Right up until 1991 the Moroccan Government consistently denied that Tazmamert even existed.

Amnesty International first raised the plight of the Tazmamert prisoners with the Moroccan authorities in 1981, when delegates visiting Morocco submitted to government officials a list of 15 prisoners who continued to be held in Tazmamert long beyond the expiry of their sentences. The officials were also asked the reason why the prisoners whose sentences had not yet expired were held in secret detention completely cut off from their families and the outside world.

However, neither the Ministry of the Interior nor the Ministry of Justice would provide any clarification, and subsequent inquiries by Amnesty International remained unanswered. In 1988 a second delegation from the organization visited Morocco and again sought information about the Tazmamert prisoners during talks with Justice and Interior Ministry officials, who maintained that the case fell within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defence - but no meetings with officials of that Ministry could be arranged.

A third delegation from Amnesty International visited Morocco in February 1990 and raised the question of the Tazmamert prisoners in a meeting with King Hassan II himself, the Head of State. However, the King refused to acknowledge the existence of Tazmamert and told Amnesty International that the prisoners were being held under house arrest for their own protection.

The survivors of Tazmamert

By 1991, half the inmates of Tazmamert were dead. An extract from a letter, written by a Tazmamert detainee in 1989, smuggled out and published for the first time in 1990, describes the situation in the prison near the end:

"Open the first cell: it's empty except for a stretcher to carry the dead and a big electric torch. The second cell is empty too. Open the third and your blood freezes at the sight of the human corpse lying on a cement shelf: a skeleton with a long thick beard hanging down over his chest, long dirty hair like primitive stone age man; long nails looking like serpent's claws; a strong smell makes you want to vomit, the stench of human waste mixed with the smell of sweat, fear and death. An attempt to call out shows that the wretch is still alive, but in agony."

On 15 September, after a worldwide campaign for the prisoners' release, all the 30 surviving prisoners were moved from Tazmamert to an unknown location thought to have been in the vicinity of Meknes. There, they were fed and bathed and given basic medical care, apparently in an attempt to make them more presentable before their release. They had lost their teeth and some of them were given sets of false ones. Their families were notified to expect their release. First, Mbarek Touil, the healthiest of the group, was released on 23 September. Twenty-four prisoners were released in October.

The Bourequat brothers remained in detention in other detention centres and hospitals until 31 December 1991 when all three were suddenly released and allowed to leave immediately for France. The delay in their release seems to have been because of the severe medical condition of Bayazid and Midhat Bourequat, who according to their statements had been unable to move from an upright sitting position for over four years.

Two prisoners, Mohammed Raiss and Achour Ghani, were not released with the others but transferred to Kenitra Central Prison, where they were allowed access to their families, but were not given adequate medical treatment. Their sentence of life imprisonment was reduced to 30 years and Mohamed Raiss was later amnestied and released on 17 September 1992. Achour Ghani still continues to be held in Kenitra Central Prison despite his very poor physical condition and continues to be deprived of adequate medical treatment.

Over 18 years of detention in conditions such as those in Tazmamert left those who survived in very serious physical condition. Their health has been damaged to such an extent that a return to normal life is impossible. Most are now between 10 and 20 centimetres shorter in height than when they were sent to Tazmamert, they suffer from spinal problems and their sight has deteriorated. The psychological scars of their ordeal cannot be healed, and they continue to live under threat of reprisals on themselves and their families if they speak out about their experiences in Tazmamert. They were told upon release to forget that Tazmamert ever existed. Most are unable to obtain the necessary medical care to help them to readjust to normal life.

Four other officers involved in the Skhirat plot had also been taken from Kenitra Central Prison on the same night in 1973 but were not transferred to Tazmamert with the others. Lieutenant-Colonel Mohamed Ababou, Captain Mohamed Chellat, Warrant Officer Harouch Akka and Officer Cadet Ahmed Mzirek were detained in a secret villa in Rabat until 1975 when they were able to escape with the Bourequat brothers and a secretly-detained trade unionist, Houcine El Manouzi. Recaptured a few days later they have never been seen since. There have been reports that all but Harouch Akka are still alive and held in the military camp of Ahermoumou.

No inquiry has been held into how the prisoners of Tazmamert came to be held in secret detention in life-threatening conditions for 18 years, or into the circumstances which led to the deaths of 33 of them. The United Nations Human Rights Committee raised the question of Tazmamert during its examination of Morocco's report on the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in November 1990. They were told by the Moroccan delegates that the name "Tazmamert" was not to be found on any official list of prisons. In July 1991 King Hassan said, in a public statement, that "Tazmamert existed only in the minds and imaginations of ill-intentioned people".

In July 1992 King Hassan acknowledged for the first time ever the existence of Tazmamert. In an interview with the French newspaper, *Libération*, the King said "it was a place used to keep persons administratively assigned there...it has no further reason to exist. The chapter is closed. It existed. It no longer does. That's all".

RECOMMENDATIONS

Until now the families of those who died in Tazmamert have not been notified by the Moroccan authorities of the deaths of their relatives, they have not been told the reasons for their deaths nor been told where they are buried. The three Bourequat brothers, who were held for 18 years without charge or trial, were never given any reason for their detention, and others were not given any explanation for their prolonged detention beyond expiry of their sentences. During all these years the Moroccan Government repeatedly denied the existence of the secret detention centre at Tazmamert, and refused to clarify the fate of those detained there. Now, the government still refuses to be held accountable for the cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of the prisoners who died and those who survived in Tazmamert.

Amnesty International now urges the Moroccan Government to:

1) Set up a full, independent and impartial inquiry to determine how the 58 military men came to be transferred to Tazmamert; how most of them came to be held beyond the expiry of their sentences; how Miloudi Seddik and the three Bourequat brothers came to be detained for years without charge or trial; and how such grossly inhuman conditions of detention which led to a high incidence of death came to be imposed and maintained for so many years.

2) Carry out a full, independent and impartial investigation into the circumstances and causes of the deaths of 33 inmates of Tazmamert, and formally notify and compensate their next of kin.

3) Ensure that the findings of these inquiries are made public and that those found to be responsible for the grave violations of human rights which occurred in Tazmamert are brought to justice.

4) Compensate all those who have been detained in Tazmamert for the years of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment they suffered in the prison and ensure that those released enjoy the basic rights and freedoms - including the rights of association, expression and movement - proclaimed in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and guaranteed by Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Morocco is a state party.

LIST OF THOSE WHO DIED IN TAZMAMERT

Military men sentenced in 1972 to between three and 20 years' imprisonment

Name	Reported date of death
ABABOU, Abdelaziz	1/9/1978
ABDESSADEK, Mohammed	1983
EL-ABDI, Mohamed	20/2/1978
ABOULMAKOUL, Mohamed	21/4/1978
ABOUNSI, Thami	24/4/1978
AMAROUCHE Kouin	1982
AZENDOUR, Boujemaa	28/10/1986
BAHBAH, Driss	26/1/1976
BENDOUROU Hamid	5/3/1991

EL-BETTIOUI, Rabah	24/4/1977
BITI, Mohamed	1984
BOUTHOU, Moha	1/9/78
CHAJAI, Mohamed	23/10/1977
CHEMSI, Mohamed	22/4/1974
DIK, Jilali	4/9/1980
FAGOURI, Mimoun	1/6/1990
EL-GHALI, Mohamed	3/1/1989
HADDANE, Bouchta	13/1/1977
HAIFI, Abdeslam	26/10/89
KOURI, Mohamed	6/2/1977
KASRAOUI, Kacem	19/12/9179
KENATTE, Mohammed	1/12/1974
EL-KOUYINE, Mohamed	12/2/1978
LAMINE, Rachid	25/10/1981
LARBI, Aziane	2/1/1980
LAFRAOUI, Abdellah	1981
MOUHAJ, Allal	9/12/1977
RABHI, Abdeslam	17/5/1981
RACHDI, Benaïssa	29/6/1983
TIJANI, Ben Redouan	26/8/1984
EL-YAKDI, Mahjoub	12/2/1978

Those held in unacknowledged detention

SEDDIK Miloudi	20/10/1987
One nameless "African"	after 1981