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Albania: Inhuman and degrading conditions in police stations

Conditions of pre-trial detention in Albania are in need of urgent reform, Amnesty International said, voicing its concern about the inhuman and degrading conditions in which many detainees are held in police stations, sometimes for prolonged periods of up to several years. These conditions, characterized by dilapidated buildings, overcrowding and extremely poor hygiene, sanitation, lighting, heating and diet, have a harmful effect on detainees and create stressful working conditions for the police officers in charge of them. The human rights organization said:

"The present situation in Albanian police stations reflect the poverty in the country, but it is also a legacy of past repression and disregard for basic human rights."

A detainee described these conditions as follows:

"I slept in a cell with up to eight people although the space was not enough for even two people... for three years and two months I slept without a bed on a mattress which for years had not been changed or washed, which smelled of urine, and continually caused me headaches. . Most of the time we carried out our personal needs, such as urinating and defecating, inside the cell, since permission to go to the toilet was limited to three times in 12 hours...finally, I felt not like a detainee awaiting trial, but like an animal in a zoo".

Amnesty International's representatives visited remand cells in a number of police stations where, in violation of the law, detainees awaiting trial are held alongside convicted prisoners for whom there is no space in prison, and minors often share cells with adults. In its latest report, *Albania: Inhuman and degrading conditions in police stations - steps towards reform* (AI Index: EUR 11/001/2004), the organization points out that since 1998 legislation based on international standards has been introduced dealing with the rights of detainees and conditions of detention, but these provisions are often ignored.

"We note certain measures taken by the Albanian authorities to alleviate the situation of some detainees. We also welcome plans for reform, such as the construction of new pre-trial detention centres designed to meet international standards. However, there appear to be no immediate plans to make the changes urgently needed to bring existing remand facilities in police stations up to even minimal standards", Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International lists a series of recommendations to the Albanian authorities to ensure that detainees are granted the most basic rights and conditions in line with domestic and international law. The organization urges the European Union and other external funders to assist the reform of the prison and remand detention system.