

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE: 0001 HRS GMT 22 MAY 1996

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL URGES THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION TO SUPPORT HEALTH PROFESSIONALS DOCUMENTING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS.

Doctors and nurses have been killed and jailed because they refused to cover up medical evidence of torture and other abuses or gave medical care to government opponents, Amnesty International said today.

In an 46-page report, the human rights organization said doctors have been coerced--sometimes by law -- into assisting amputations, and have been threatened for treating protesters, or pressured to issue false medical reports.

“Medical evidence of abuse is a powerful aid in search for justice by those who have been ill-treated which governments are often anxious to cover up,” Amnesty International said.

In launching its report -- which gives examples from 12 countries -- the organization called on the World Health Organization, the United Nations governments and national medical associations to strengthen mechanisms for the reporting of human rights violations.

In Iraq in 1994 for example, doctors were required by law to amputate the ears and brand the foreheads of military and civilian “deserters”; they were told that if they refused the same would happen to them. One doctor was reportedly executed and many were imprisoned for their refusal to carry out these orders.

Some doctors assist governments passively through tolerance of abuses or actively through advice and assistance in the cover-up of human rights violations.

“The vulnerability of doctors or nurses results from the absence of a strong collective refusal to compromise ethical and professional standards. It is time for the principles of rights and ethics to be realized,” Amnesty International said.

Health professionals and medical associations can contribute to the prevention of different abuses by refusing to be exploited in any way for the purpose of torture, interrogation or punishment. Moreover, they can assist the detection, documentation and exposure of human rights violations. The medical examination of prisoners at the time of arrest and regularly during detention is a potential safeguard against physical and mental abuse.

In India, a doctor at the Bone and Joint Hospital in Srinagar said that a prisoner who had to have both feet amputated after developing gangrene, had in fact been kept on ice resulting in frost bite, had acid sprinkled on his feet and all his blood capillaries destroyed.

The Turkish Medical Association (TMA) has carried out a number of investigations into complicity of doctors, nurses and other health professionals in torture in Turkey, including an inquiry initiated in 1995 into an apparent medical cover-up of torture: two physicians had

prepared medical reports alleging that Ahmet Özçil had not been tortured while he was kept in custody despite other reports verifying torture.

In Kenya, there have been several incidents of the police attempting to influence what doctors write in the reports of their medical examinations of detainees, especially when it is obvious a suspect has been tortured. One doctor said that “many times I have been advised [by police] to stop writing medical reports on torture victims”.

In 1995, the Bahraini security authorities reportedly warned doctors that if they treated any of those wounded during anti-government protests, they would suffer repercussions. They also prevented ambulances from taking some of the wounded to hospital.

“Some governments showing a cynical disregard for ethics try to put pressure on doctors to produce false evidence or no evidence at all,” Amnesty International said. “Health workers who see the results of human rights abuses daily need support -- obviously from their professional associations but also from the wider community. Governments should be accountable for their suppression or manipulation of medical evidence.”

If medical examinations and investigations are to play any role in protecting prisoners certain minimum conditions must be met; currently these are not met in many countries. In its new report, Amnesty International documents a number of reasons for the failure of health professionals to effectively expose human rights violations and calls for these impediments to ethical practice to be addressed.

Amnesty International has published and disseminated codes of professional ethics with a view to increasing awareness of basic ethics and the links these have with the promotion and protection of human rights.

“The World Health Organization should undertake more initiatives and give a higher priority to the defence of health professionals under threat for carrying out the ethical practice of their profession,” Amnesty International said.

The organization’s health professionals network, which has members in more than 30 countries, will be undertaking a campaign on these themes over the next six months.

ENDS../

For more information or to arrange an interview, please call:

Marc Saghie, Press Office, International Secretariat:

Tel.: (+44) 171 413 5831

Fax.: (+44) 171 413 5815/5835