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DJIBOUTI: @HUNDREDS TORTURED AFTER MASS ARRESTS

Up to 300 people were tortured by security police in Djibouti following mass arrests in the last year, with prisoners being swung from a pole and beaten, burned with cigarettes and given electric shocks, Amnesty International said today.

In its first major report on the country, the human rights organization also details the imprisonment of government opponents - some detained without charge or trial and others charged with political offences carrying the death penalty.

"The government said 11 years ago that torture would be stopped, but the evidence shows that it's still happening," Amnesty International said. "We're again calling on the government to urgently tackle both the problem of torture and other human rights issues."

As recently as two months ago there were more reports of police brutality, leading to the deaths of 10 people in police detention the day after they were arrested in a round-up of suspected criminals.

The organization said its investigations into previous incidents have found that the security police systematically tortured more than 200 members of a Somali clan arrested in the capital in October 1990 in connection with the bombing of the Café de Paris, where one person was killed and 14 injured. Scores of members of the Afar ethnic group arrested in the capital in January of this year after an attack on an army barracks in the north were also tortured.

In April this year, Amnesty International representatives visited Djibouti and interviewed dozens of prisoners and former prisoners who alleged they had been tortured, and medically examined some 20 of them. The results bore out their claims of being tortured by such methods as "the swing" (la balançoire) - being tied by hands and feet to a bar, gagged with a sponge soaked in detergent and beaten all over the body - or having a bottle forced into the anus.

The prisoners were tortured in incommunicado detention, which is legally allowed in Djibouti for up to 10 days, in most cases to try to force them to make false confessions to involvement in the bombing or attack.

All the detainees arrested last October in connection with the bombing were released after some weeks of judicial investigations. However, some 20 of the Afar detainees picked up in January after the attack on the army barracks remain in detention, charged with seeking to overthrow the government. Amnesty International is concerned that they may not receive a fair trial when they appear before a special state security tribunal - there is no right of appeal and the tribunal, which includes senior civil servants, is not independent.

The organization said that some of these prisoners may in fact be prisoners of conscience, imprisoned because of their opposition to the government rather than because there is any evidence that they participated in anti-government violence. They include Ali Aref Bourhane, former head of government before Djibouti's independence from France in 1977, his nephew Aref Mohamed Aref, a lawyer who has previously defended political prisoners, and Mohamed Daoud Chehem, a senior civil servant.

In its report, Amnesty International also expresses concern about non-violent government opponents who have been placed in administrative detention. Those include Mohamed Moussa Ali, an activist for a multi-party political system, who had been detained from April to September this year.

In releasing its report, the organization is calling on the government to end torture, stop arbitrarily detaining government opponents and ensure fair trials or release for Ali Aref Bourhane and his fellow detainees.

During Amnesty International's visit to Djibouti in April, government representatives said they would study the organization's recommendations, but they have not yet responded.

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