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Thailand: Widespread use of torture - from policing to prisons

In a new report issued today, *Widespread abuses in the administration of justice*, Amnesty International said that police and army officers use torture to extract confessions, or to punish and humiliate suspects.

"Torture should not be accepted as normal behaviour - it is a gross abuse of power. The government must do much more to publicly condemn it, and to investigate those responsible and hold them to account," Amnesty International said.

The police and army use torture and ill-treatment in detention, shortly after arrest, during transport of detainees, and in military drug treatment camps. Poor Thai people, migrants, and members of ethnic groups are particularly vulnerable.

On 7 December 2001, two Akha tribesmen, Ateh Amoh and Ajuuh Cheh Cuuh Gooh, were seized by soldiers from their village in Chiang Rai Province, and taken to the 11th Cavalry military camp in order to be treated in an opium detoxification program. They were pushed into a small hole in the ground where three other Akha men were already detained.

Soldiers then poured water, coal and ashes on the five men and left them there until the evening when they were blindfolded and taken separately for questioning. One man escaped, and as punishment Ateh Amoh and Ajuuh Cheh Cuuh Gooh were severely beaten. Ajuuh Cheh Cuuh Gooh died from the beatings on 9 December and Ateh Amoh spent six days in the hospital being treated for a ruptured lung and other injuries. Amnesty International calls on the government to expedite an effective investigation and bring those found responsible to justice.

In August 2000, a man belonging to the Karen ethnic minority was tortured by the police during interrogation for the murder of British backpacker Kirsty Jones. He was blindfolded and stripped naked, and beaten by police, who also stood on his stomach. They demanded that he confess to the murder while threatening to kill him. He refused to do so and was dumped on the side of the road.

Torture and ill-treatment in prisons is commonly carried out by "trusties" (prisoners who

are given privileges by prison guards) as a form of punishment for breaking prison regulations. However prison guards are also directly involved.

Sinchai Saslee, a Thai prisoner in his mid-30s was beaten to death on 17 May 2001, apparently for attempting to nail a water bottle to his cell wall. He and a guard began arguing about it when several guards began beating him with batons, and kicking and punching him. Eventually he lost consciousness.

The Amnesty International report also highlights harsh conditions in prisons, including extreme over-crowding, lack of adequate food, sanitation, and medical care. Over-crowding has been an escalating problem, as the authorities arrest more and more people on drugs charges. While Amnesty International acknowledges the severity of the drug problem in Thailand, it also calls for adequate provisions to be made for an increased prison population.

In addition, prisons have a high rate of deaths in custody from diseases such as AIDS and tuberculosis and many prisoners receive no medical treatment at all. Continuous shackling in heavy leg irons of death row prisoners is routine, even though it is not permitted under Thai law. Prisons are chronically understaffed, partly because prison guards are so poorly paid.

"The Royal Thai government needs to ensure that the prison system is adequately funded in order to improve conditions. Prison staff and other law enforcement officials also need to be trained in international human rights standards," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International's report makes several recommendations to the Royal Thai government, including:

It should issue clear instructions to all officials not to torture or ill-treat anyone in their custody.

All reports of torture should be impartially investigated and those found responsible brought to justice.

The government should take immediate steps to improve prison conditions, including abolishing in practice the use of prolonged shackling, and providing adequate space, medical care, and food for prisoners.

The corrections department should ensure that the "trustie" system is no longer used.

For a copy of the report visit: <http://www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/asa390032002>

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