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Italy: Alleged torture of Somali prisoners should be investigated by a judicial body independent of the military authorities

Amnesty International has welcomed the prompt investigations opened by the Italian military authorities into the case of Somali prisoners allegedly tortured by Italian forces, but has urged that a comprehensive inquiry be conducted by a judicial body independent of the military, and that the findings be made public -- to ensure a demonstrably impartial examination, as required under the UN Convention against Torture, to which Italy is a party.

In letters to the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Defence, the human rights organization expressed concern at recent public allegations that Somali prisoners were tortured and ill-treated by members of the Italian forces in 1993, and -- while acknowledging that the multinational forces based in Somalia were operating in extremely difficult circumstances -- Amnesty International stresses that it is essential that such forces observe the requirements of international humanitarian law and the prohibition in human rights law of torture and ill-treatment.

"International law -- including treaties to which Italy is party -- allows no derogation from those requirements whatever the circumstances," Amnesty International said.

If, as Michele Patruno -- the former soldier who made the allegations -- has said, the Italian conscripts received no specific training relating to the treatment of prisoners before arriving in Somalia, Italy would be in breach of its obligations under the Geneva Conventions and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security, both of which require dissemination of humanitarian law to all military personnel.

In the letters Amnesty International asks to be informed "of any mechanism the Italian Government has itself established to provide a recourse of complaint to Somalis alleging violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by members of the Italian armed forces."

"If no such mechanism exists, then we hope that the Italian authorities will make an effective procedure available to Somalis as soon as possible," Amnesty International said.

Background

Last week, Michele Patruno, a former member of the Italian army, made public allegations that in early 1993, while serving with the Italian contingent of the multinational task force based in Somalia at that time, he witnessed members of the Italian armed forces torturing and ill-treating Somali prisoner. In some cases, the treatment is said to have led to the death of the prisoners. His allegations are supported by photographic evidence. Further allegations relating to the conduct of members of the armed forces have been made by other former soldiers and individuals working in Somalia in 1993.

According to Michele Patruno's testimony huts and villages were deliberately and unjustifiably destroyed during arms searches by Italian army personnel in Somalia, and Somali citizens taken prisoner by the Italian forces were taken to military camps to be interrogated. They would be kept tied up in the sun, deprived of food and water, or given only spicy food to increase their thirst. If they still refused to talk, they would be subjected to blows, electric shocks -- including to the testicles -- had burning cigarettes applied to the soles of their feet, or were thrown against razor-wire fences. Patruno claims that some paratroopers had themselves photographed as they stood with a foot on the heads of Somalis who had been tortured, and that senior officers were always present during interrogations, and witnessed the torture inflicted. ENDS.../

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