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Lebanon: The threat of further deterioration of human rights in the name of security and enforcement of the state authority

Human rights in Lebanon are under threat of further deterioration as basic individual rights are being curbed in the name of security and enforcement of the state authority, Amnesty International said today, as it launched a new report on the human rights situation in the country.

"This emphasis on security and order may well open the door to future human rights violations, particularly in view of some disturbing developments that have taken place since the end of the civil war," Amnesty International said.

The end of the civil war created an environment conducive to the respect and advancement of human rights in the country. However, the government has failed to take full advantage of such environment to investigate past human rights violations and prevent arbitrary political arrests and detention, torture and ill-treatment, violation of the right to fair trial, and expansion of the use of the death penalty. These are all disturbing features which could have far reaching implications for Lebanese citizens.

"Unlike the civil war period, when the state authority and the rule of law all but collapsed, the state authority has been recovered and there are now enforceable mechanisms in place for Lebanon to comply with its human rights obligations under its law and constitution as well as international treaties," Amnesty International said.

Nevertheless, the authorities continue to arbitrarily arrest people for peacefully expressing their views. Since 1990, hundreds have been arrested for political reasons or on security grounds by the army, internal security forces, military police and Syrian military personnel in Lebanon. Particular political groups have apparently been targeted with total disregard for their rights under international law as well as Lebanon's own legislation.

A member of the now banned Lebanese Forces (LF) party -- the main Christian militia during the civil war -- arrested in 1994, describes his experience: "I was detained, tortured and released without any reason nor any legal justification or formality. Upon my release, I was threatened not to be involved in politics, social activities or even clubs, nor to take part in any normal gathering where it involved friends or otherwise they would capture me again."

Another former political detainee -- held from 1995 to 1996 and subjected to prolonged incommunicado detention -- told Amnesty International: "For two months and 17 days I suffered [physical and psychological] torture... I was subjected to various methods of torture such as Ballanco (hanging by the wrists which are tied behind the back), electric shocks, including on the testicles, and beating.... I was forced to stand still, blindfolded, for a period of five days without food.... When I collapsed they took me to a hospital where I stayed five days..."

These testimonies are typical of many received by Amnesty International from other detainees, particularly those who were kept at the Ministry of Defence in Yezah. Many of the arrests that have taken place since 1990 have been carried out without arrest warrants, and the detainees have been held in prolonged incommunicado detention without access to lawyers, and sometimes in places which are not recognized centres of detention. Such conditions of detention have facilitated torture and ill-treatment.

These procedural irregularities, coupled with allegations of torture and ill-treatment, are often followed by unfair trials. Many of the political detainees whose cases have been monitored by Amnesty International were convicted by courts after trials whose procedures failed to comply with international fair trial standards and handed down heavy sentences including death and life imprisonment.

Contrary to world trends, in 1994 the Lebanese government issued legislation expanding the use of the death penalty.

At least 200 Lebanese nationals have been detained in Syria mostly without charge or trial. Some are allowed family visits, but most are reportedly held in incommunicado detention. While many are believed to have been taken during the civil war -- either directly by Syrian troops or by various Lebanese militias allied to Syria -- some were arrested and detained well after the end of the war in 1990.

Amnesty International has sought clarification from the Lebanese and Syrian authorities about the procedures under which the Syrian military personnel stationed in Lebanon may arrest Lebanese nationals and detain them in Syria, but has not received any response. These arrests and detention appear to have taken place with the acquiescence of the Lebanese Government, which has a duty to investigate each of the cases and take any necessary action to safeguard the rights of its citizens.

On the failure of the Government to investigate human rights violations from the time of the civil war, the issue of "disappearances" and abductions is of paramount importance.

"The Lebanese Government has a responsibility to set up an independent commission of inquiry to determine the fate of those who went missing following abduction by the warring factions. The commission should be empowered to consider appropriate compensation for victims and their families.

"This process is important not just for the sake of the victims and their relatives, but as an important signal that the perpetrators of human rights abuses will be held to account for their actions in the future," Amnesty International said.

The Amnesty International report concludes by presenting a series of recommendations to the authorities, which include measures to prevent arbitrary detentions, end torture and ill-treatment, ensure fair trials for political prisoners and end the use of the death penalty.
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For further information, to arrange an interview or to receive a copy of the report, please contact Amnesty International's Press Office on +44 171 413 5566