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Tunisian authorities must investigate new torture allegations

The Tunisian authorities must launch an independent and impartial investigation into recent reports of torture and other ill-treatment against protesters in detention, Amnesty International said today.

Wahbi Ben Abdel Jalil Ammamou was reportedly arrested on 6 May by three members of the judicial police in a coffee shop in Sahline, in Monastir governorate in eastern Tunisia. He told Amnesty International that he was taken to the judicial investigations centre where he was beaten, insulted and otherwise ill-treated. He was accused of planning for, and inciting people to participate in, a general strike that was due to be held in Monastir on 7 May.

Wahbi Ben Abdel Jalil Ammamou said that, while he was in police custody, officers punched and kicked him and beat him with sticks all over his body for at least 20 minutes; he sustained a broken nose and injuries to his stomach as a result. He added that they then took him to a corridor where they made him take off his clothes and threw cold water on him. He said he was kept in the corridor for two hours before he was taken to a room with other detainees. He was finally released around noon the following day.

The general strike that took place in Monastir on 7 May had been planned by residents of the city to demand jobs opportunities and to express their disappointment that the authorities' promises to improve living conditions and develop the area had not materialized.

The recent allegations of torture and other ill-treatment come at a time when many Tunisians are frustrated with what they see as continuing high levels of corruption and unemployment and bad living conditions. Protests and strikes have been taking place in recent months, many organized by trade unions. Some have been marred by violence on the part of the security forces. In February a demonstration organized by the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) was reportedly forcibly dispersed by security officers using tear gas and batons, resulting in the injury of protesters, as well as of several journalists. In April a demonstration was organized by the Union of Unemployed Degree Holders (Union des diplômés chômeurs) to demand job opportunities. Over 35 protesters were beaten and kicked by security officers before being released shortly afterwards.

Although not to the same level as under former President Ben Ali, Amnesty International has received other reports of torture and other ill-treatment in police custody since the 2010-2011 uprising. Most of these reports are from protesters who allege that they were beaten while being arrested or while being held in detention centres. One example is the case of Fouad Badrouci, a 17-year-old student who was arrested by police in Tunis in May 2011 after a protest. He was detained for a day during which time he was beaten, denied food and water and made to remain in uncomfortable positions. On his release he had a broken nose, arm and rib.

Although the Tunisian government amended articles in the law on torture in 2011 to bring the definition of torture and other ill-treatment more into line with international standards, the law still includes a statute of limitations of 15 years. The Tunisian authorities must urgently give clear instructions to all security officers involved in arrest, detention and interrogation that torture and other ill-treatment are not acceptable under any circumstances and that perpetrators are brought to justice and victims receive appropriate reparation.

In May 2011, the UN Special Rapporteur on torture made a visit to Tunisia and noted that incidents of torture and other ill-treatment continued to occur. His recommendations included the need for the government to instruct police and other law enforcement officials that torture and other ill-treatment are not tolerated and that those who commit them are held criminally liable, as well as the need to ensure that safeguards against torture are guaranteed in practice.

Acts of torture and other ill-treatment are unacceptable at any time, but the concerns are thrown into particularly stark relief when the Tunisian government is writing the country's new constitution, a constitution that should enshrine fundamental human rights including the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment.

Public Document

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