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Jordan: Systematic torture of political suspects

"They put out their cigarettes on my hand, beat me with sticks on my body...then hit me on the feet continuously for a period of three hours...The men had their faces covered...The beatings were so painful. I told him I was ready to say anything he wanted, so they carried me on a stretcher, as I was unable to walk, back to the interrogation offices."

- Usama Abu Hazeem, who was sentenced to death on 12 March 2006 based on a "confession" extracted under torture. His sentence has since been commuted to 10 years' imprisonment.

Jordan maintains a military security agency that detains, interrogates and tortures political and security suspects, both Jordanians and other nationals transferred to the country in apparent coordination with the USA, Amnesty International said today in a major new report.

The report describes the cases of dozens of individuals subjected to torture and ill-treatment in Jordan, ten of whom appear to be victims of the US-led "rendition programme".

"Jordan appears to be a central hub in a global complex of secret detention centres operated by the US in coordination with foreign intelligence agencies," said Malcolm Smart, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme. "It is into this complex that suspects 'disappear' -- and are held for interrogation indefinitely, outside any legal or administrative process."

The General Intelligence Department (GID) -- a military security agency directly linked to the Jordanian prime minister -- is the primary instrument of abuse of political detainees and for obtaining forced "confessions". According to former senior US intelligence officials, the GID receives secret funding from the US government.

"GID officers have extensive powers and benefit from near total impunity -- acting virtually as a law unto themselves," said Malcolm Smart. "The GID's powers to hold detainees indefinitely and deny them all contact with the outside world is a recipe for torture and other abuse."

According to the Amnesty International report, once "confessions" are obtained under torture, cases go to the State Security Court (SSC) -- where judgements regularly appear to be based on little more than these "confessions". Over the last ten years, over 100 defendants have alleged before the SSC that they were tortured to make them "confess". The SSC has failed to adequately investigate any of these claims. Disturbingly, the SSC has imposed death sentences in a number of these cases -- some of which have already been carried out.

Methods of torture and ill-treatment suffered by detainees in Jordanian places of detention and detailed in the Amnesty International report include "*falaqa*" -- whereby the soles of the victims feet are repeatedly beaten with a stick; beatings with sticks, cables, plastic pipes, ropes or whips; and "*shabeh*" ("the phantom"), whereby the victim is suspended for up to several hours by his handcuffed wrists, and then beaten.

The methods, likelihood, severity and duration of torture varies according to a number of factors. Suspected "Islamists" and Palestinian-origin Jordanians, for example, are more likely to be tortured.

Despite Jordan's record on torture, on 10 August 2005, the UK signed a "memorandum of understanding" (MOU) with Jordanian authorities that supposedly provides "diplomatic assurances" that certain individuals of Jordanian nationality would not be tortured if they should be forcibly removed by the UK authorities to Jordan.

"Amnesty International has been documenting the same torture concerns in Jordan and the same absence of safeguards for more than 20 years," said Malcolm Smart. "Given the complicity of the Jordanian authorities in the practice of torture it is inconceivable that the UK government would claim to be 'assured' by an agreement with them that is clearly not worth the paper it is written on."

"Diplomatic understandings are not enforceable under international law and the UK government is fully aware of that -- just as they are fully aware that torture systematically takes place inside Jordanian detention centres. UK government reliance on Jordanian 'assurances' under the current circumstances is a violation of its obligations under international human rights law -- and morally indefensible."

"The Jordanian government has a responsibility to maintain public safety and bring to justice any perpetrators of attacks on civilians," said Malcolm Smart. "However, it must do so in a way that is in accordance with internationally-agreed human rights standards -- including the obligation to prohibit and prevent torture. It is therefore high time for the Jordanian government to take concrete measures to tackle the continuing problem of torture by the GID and other agencies."

Amnesty International recognizes that the Jordanian government has put in place certain mechanisms aimed at reducing incidences of torture, but notes that they have been largely ineffective, as torture persists in Jordan and is particularly entrenched in the GID. The organization's recommendations to the Jordanian government include:

- ending the use of both secret, and incommunicado, detention;
- curtailing the powers of the GID and ensuring a separation of power -- both in law and in practice -- between the authorities responsible for detention of suspects and those responsible for interrogation;
- investigating all allegations of torture or other ill-treatment promptly and independently, and bringing to justice any officials who commit such human rights violations;
- ceasing Jordan's participation in renditions and other secret transfers of prisoners and publicly disclosing the names and other details of all those who have been detained in or transferred through Jordan in this context.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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