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Mauritania: Torture of alleged Islamists widespread

Amnesty International is concerned about the persistent use of torture in Mauritania to extract confessions – especially from those accused of links with Islamic groups.

In May 2008, approximately 40 people accused of involvement in armed terrorist attacks, allegedly launched by members of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), were detained incommunicado for more than 20 days. Some were tortured.

Amnesty International said that the torture occurred under the provisions of an anti-terrorist law that allows serious human rights violations.

During a research mission to Mauritania in February 2008, former detainees told Amnesty International about a form of torture called “the jaguar”. One former detainee described this form of torture: “During questioning, they tied my hands under my knees and put a metal bar under my knees and suspended me from the ceiling in the ‘jaguar’ position. Then they started to hit me.”

Some detainees were also deprived of sleep and burned with cigarettes.

Detainees who were victims of torture complained to the prosecutor about their treatment but, to Amnesty International’s knowledge, the prosecutor has taken no measures against the perpetrators of these acts.

These practices have been publicly denounced by the Mauritanian Bar Association and the Mauritanian Human Rights Association, but there has been no public reaction from the government about the allegations.

During an audience granted to the Amnesty International delegation in January 2008, Mauritanian President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi gave assurances that torture was no longer tolerated in Mauritania since he came to power.

Background information:

Mauritanian law allows for a detention period of 15 days for anyone accused of “crimes and offences against the internal or external security of the state”, the charge most commonly made against those accused of links with alleged terrorist groups. This already excessive period of custody has not been respected in the case of the alleged Islamists arrested in May 2008. They have been detained incommunicado for more than 20 days and have not been permitted to see their lawyers or families, even though the law authorises them to do so.

These practices are contrary to the provisions of the Code of Criminal Procedure, reviewed in 2007 after the new government came to power, which forbids the “physical or moral ill-treatment” of anyone

held in detention and states that the family of the detainee must be informed of their arrest “without delay”. For security offences, the period of detention after arrest cannot be longer than 15 days.

Amnesty International called on Mauritanian President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi to give clear instructions to the security forces to halt any practices amounting to torture or other forms of ill-treatment.

The organization also called for all those suspected of torture or ill-treatment to be immediately suspended from their posts and for an independent judicial inquiry to be immediately opened so that those responsible can be brought to justice.