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Cameroon: United Nations expert confirms that torture is "widespread and systematic"

In a damning and disturbing report just published, Sir Nigel Rodley, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on torture, confirms that torture and ill-treatment are "systematic and widespread" in Cameroon's police and gendarmerie cells.

Amnesty International has repeatedly over many years condemned the routine practice of torture and ill-treatment of both political detainees and criminal suspects in Cameroon, which has resulted in the deaths of many of the victims, and has called for effective measures to end torture and ill-treatment.

"The Special Rapporteur's visit to Cameroon in May last year has been a major initiative in further highlighting the extent and frequency of torture and ill-treatment in Cameroon," Amnesty International said. "The report adds further detailed evidence of the problem and confirms that it is continuing unchecked."

"The evidence is incontrovertible," the organization added. "In many of the places visited by the Special Rapporteur, he met people who had wounds and injuries which could only have been the result of recently inflicted torture."

For example, at the gendarmerie headquarters in Yaoundé known as the *"Brigade du Lac"* , detainees had severe bruising and marks from machete and lash blows. The detainees claimed that they were regularly beaten and subjected to the *balançoire*, where they were suspended from a rod passed between their hands tied behind their legs, to force them to confess. In one of the interrogation rooms the Special Rapporteur found machetes casually hidden under a bag and in another room he found a large number of belts.

At the police criminal investigation service unit, the *police judiciaire*, in Yaoundé, most detainees had been tortured at the time of their arrest, in particular, by being struck with machetes. They still bore marks, often fresh, on their feet, legs, arms and backs; some also had open wounds. One of the detainees had very recently had all his toe nails ripped out and another, who had been shot in the foot and the knee two months earlier, had still received no medical attention.

In his report to the UN Commission on Human Rights -- which will meet from 20 March 2000 -- the Special Rapporteur provides a lengthy catalogue of individual cases of torture and ill-treatment. The 71 cases documented in an annex to the report date from 1991 until the time of his visit.

The Special Rapporteur observes that neither youth nor age appear to protect detainees from being tortured. On 17 March 1999 police officers forced their way into a children's home in Douala, apparently searching for a criminal suspect. They forced children to kneel and then beat and kicked them. Two received bullet wounds to the chest and abdomen respectively and were refused medical assistance. Several children, including those with bullet wounds, were taken to a police station where

they were beaten, including on the soles of their feet. The police eventually admitted that they had acted on incorrect information.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called for all complaints of torture in Cameroon to be promptly and impartially investigated, for the findings to be made public and for those responsible for torture to be brought to justice.

Although legislation prohibiting torture was passed in January 1997, Amnesty International has repeatedly pointed out that it has been persistently violated by police and gendarmerie officers. In very few cases have perpetrators been prosecuted. Two police officers, sentenced to 10 years and six years' imprisonment for the death in November 1997 of a young man in police custody in Yaoundé, had their sentences reduced on appeal to eight years and one year respectively.

The Special Rapporteur also concludes that torture and ill-treatment can only persist where law enforcement officers act with impunity. Even in the few cases where there have been prosecutions, the judiciary has appeared reluctant to find law enforcement officers guilty of torture and impose or maintain sentences appropriate to the crime.

The Special Rapporteur's report reinforces many of the recommendations which Amnesty International has made for ending the practice of torture in Cameroon. For example, he calls on the highest political authorities to state publicly that torture and ill-treatment will not be tolerated and that those found to have committed or condoned such acts will be instantly removed from public service and prosecuted with the full vigour of the law.

"The shocking information provided in the Special Rapporteur's report cannot be ignored or dismissed by the Cameroon government," Amnesty International said. "It must respond by taking decisive and immediate action to end torture."

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