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Investigation of Mauritanian army officer accused of torture -- a step towards truth and justice

The recent investigation of a Mauritanian army officer in France is a positive step in ensuring justice for the victims of gross human rights abuses committed in Mauritania over the years, Amnesty International said today.

The human rights organization welcomed the investigation by French judicial authorities of Ely Ould Dha, an officer in the Mauritanian army, for crimes of torture, allegedly committed in 1990 and 1991, against two Mauritanian citizens. The two alleged victims of torture are cooperating with the judicial authorities.

“The culture of impunity for human rights violations has gone unchallenged for decades in Mauritania,” Amnesty International said. “Action by the international community is crucial in ensuring that those responsible for gross human rights violations do not escape justice”.

Amnesty International is urging the French authorities to consider investigating any Mauritanian official against whom there may be allegations of serious human rights violations and who may enter their jurisdiction.

As a state party to the United Nations (UN) Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment, France is obliged under Article 6 to institute criminal proceedings against any person within its territory who is alleged to have committed or participated in torture, despite the fact that the torture may have occurred outside France.

“Moreover, it is crucial that investigations are not hampered by political considerations,” the organization added.

Over the weekend, Ely Ould Dha was arrested in Montpellier, southern France, for alleged crimes of torture. He is now detained and is being questioned by judicial authorities in Montpellier. Mr Ely Ould Dha was approached by the French authorities while attending a course by the French army at a military school in Montpellier.

The authorities intervened after human rights organisations, including the *Federation International Des Droits de l’Homme* (FIDH) and the *Ligue des Droits de l’Homme* (LDH) put forward a formal complaint to the police authorities in Montpellier. Mr Ely Ould Dha is accused of having tortured at least two people in a prison near Nouakchott, the capital city of Mauritania, in 1990 and 1991.

Background

Widespread human rights violations, including political killings, “disappearances” and the use of torture, were carried out by Mauritanian authorities over many years. In 1986, mass arrests of suspected government opponents from both black and Arab-Berber communities began and a high-level of human rights violations continued to be recorded in the early 1990s. Victims of such violations included black Mauritians suspected of being members of the opposition, civil servants, as well as farmers and cattle herders from the south.

Between 1989 and 1991 hundreds of black African villagers, particularly those from the Senegal River Valley, were targeted by the Mauritanian authorities, who are dominated by the Moors or Beidane group. Political killings, arrests, “disappearances” and torture occurred in the context of mass expulsions of members of the black communities towards neighbouring countries.

The use of torture increased considerably during this period. A variety of torture techniques were used, such as electric shock, burning with hot coals and the “jaguar”, which involved suspending the victim upside down from a metal bar and beating the soles of the feet.

Tens of thousands of Mauritians fled such violations to Senegal and other neighbouring countries, while those responsible for these crimes remained unpunished.

A similar case to the one brought against Ely Ould Dha has recently been brought to the attention of the judicial authorities in Paris. However in that case, Ould Hmeid Salem -- a Mauritanian army officer receiving specialist medical care in Paris -- was informed of the initiative by the French judicial authorities and fled to the Canary Islands.

The French tribunals had declared themselves competent to hear Ould Hmeid Salem’s case on the basis of the UN Convention Against Torture.
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For more information on Mauritania please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on 44 171 413 5566, or see our Web site at www.amnesty.org.