

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Sudan: Darfur crisis reached the capital

Amnesty International is gravely concerned by the Sudanese security forces' crackdown following the incursion into Khartoum, by an armed group. The crackdown has been characterized by serious human rights violations including hundreds of arbitrary arrests, cases of ill-treatment, as well as extra-judicial executions. These violations have mostly been targeted at Darfuris.

On Saturday 10 May 2008, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), a Darfur based armed opposition group launched a military attack on the outskirts of Khartoum. The attack marked the beginning of a new phase of the conflict in Darfur, with an armed opposition group reaching the edges of the capital for the first time since the conflict's inception in 2003. Many members of the JEM were reportedly killed during the attack and scores were arrested.

The government's response to this military attack has since included hundreds of arbitrary arrests and some cases of extra-judicial executions. These have been carried out by the Sudanese police and National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) and targeted at Darfuris, particularly from the Zaghawa ethnic tribe. Since the Sudanese forces repelled the attack a curfew was installed in Omdurman and check points were set up throughout the streets of the capital, allowing the arrest and detention of people travelling in buses and cars, while the NISS and the police have been raiding houses of Darfuris and their families.

"Civilians, mainly youths, have been brutally arrested in the streets, in their homes, and taken to yet unknown places of detention. The arrests in public places have been mostly based on their appearance, age, accent, and the colour of their skin." With these words, a prominent Sudanese lawyer expressed his concerns to Amnesty International over the arbitrary nature of arrests – with individuals arrested on the basis of their ethnicity and age -, the associated ill-treatment and the lack of information about the places of detention. He told Amnesty International that young men, including minors, were more at risk because the JEM is known by the government to partially rely on young recruits. Eyewitnesses reported that those under threat of arrest were asked to pronounce certain words, to judge whether they were Darfuris or not.

The arrests include Darfuri men and women as well as entire families. Amnesty International further received reports of lawyers, journalists and at least one human rights activist having been arrested over the past week.

As of 21 May 2008, five members of the Popular Congress Party (PCP), a political opposition party, remain in detention after its leader Hassan Al Turabi and other members of the PCP were released.

Amnesty International condemns the arbitrary arrest of hundreds of people and urges the Sudanese Government to immediately and unconditionally release all those that were solely detained on the basis of their ethnicity or for the peaceful expression of their opinion. Amnesty International asks the Sudanese Government to charge all other detainees with a recognizable criminal offence, or else release them immediately.

Eye witnesses spoke to Amnesty of the ill-treatment experienced by some of those arrested by the police and NISS during the arrest. One lawyer, who was released two days after he was detained, described how he and members of his family were dragged from their home and how he was beaten with rifles on his head and legs, leaving him with several serious injuries. Other witnesses spoke of extra-judicial executions of men and at least one woman in public in Omdurman. According to various reports, the woman was shot on 11 May by the NISS in the streets of Umbada in Omdurman, after she had protested against the arrest of her younger brother.

According to reports from his family, a 31 year old man from the White Nile was arrested by the NISS on either 16 or 17 May and taken to a NISS detention centre. He had already been arrested and released one day before, after he was accused of giving shelter to members of the JEM in one of his houses. On 19 May, when a relative went to inquire about his place of detention, he was informed by the NISS that the person in question had died of kidney failure whilst in detention. The NISS informed the relative that the condition had occurred on his first day of detention and that they had sent him to a NISS hospital, where he died after which he was transferred to a morgue. On 19 May, his family requested the morgue's doctor to perform a forensic examination before taking delivery of his body. The examinations revealed that he died from a heavy internal bleeding as a result of several severe injuries and bruising on different parts of his body.

Amnesty International calls on the government of Sudan to condemn and investigate all allegations of ill-treatment, torture and all extra-judicial executions that have taken place in the aftermath of the JEM attack.

Although a number of detainees, according to reports, might be held in Kober prison in Khartoum, the whereabouts of most of those arrested remain unknown. In the case of many, namely those who were arrested in the streets, their detaining authority is also unknown. Families of those arrested consider them as missing. Amnesty International is concerned that many may have been subject to enforced disappearance.

The numbers and circumstances in which people are being arrested, the uncertainty surrounding their whereabouts and the ill-treatment associated with the arrests all lead to serious concerns over the fate of those detained. Amnesty International is gravely concerned over those held in incommunicado detention, possibly in non-recognised detention centres, with no access to lawyers or relatives, putting them at increased risk of torture and extra-judicial killings.

Amnesty International is further concerned over the fate of persons without identification living in the capital. The arrests are widespread and taking place throughout the city and on public transport, putting those who are unable to provide a proof of their identity more at risk.

Amnesty International received unconfirmed reports of mass graves following the attack by JEM on 10 May, one of them allegedly in Western Omdurman. Amnesty International demands that these possible sites are identified and secured so that independent investigators, with the requisite expertise, can examine them.

Amnesty International further urges the authorities to repeal Article 31 of the National Security Forces Act, which allows detainees to be held for up to nine months without access to judicial review.

Amnesty International reminds the Government of Sudan of its past commitment to grant Human Rights Officers from the United Nations Mission in Sudan access to places of detention and urges the Sudanese Government to immediately account for the whereabouts of all those in custody and to grant total access to Human Rights Officers, family, lawyers and doctors to places of detention.