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SYRIA: TORTURE, DEATHS IN DETENTION AND INADEQUATE HEALTH CARE IN PRISONS

In a research paper entitled Syria: Torture by the Security Forces (published on 28 October 1987), Amnesty International describes its concerns in Syria. These include torture, deaths in detention, inadequate medical care in prisons and inadequate legal protection of prisoners. This paper, based on the above publication, concentrates on issues relevant to health professionals.

Torture

AI has evidence of torture being practised in Syria by members of the various military and security organisations and in Lebanon by members of the Syrian forces based there. Torture takes a number of forms, the majority of which involve some form of beating of the victim. Two common methods are dullab (tyre) which involves hanging the victim from a suspended tyre and beating him or her over the body, and falaqa, beating the soles of the feet. Sexual assault, verbal and physical humiliation, electrical torture, burning, slashing the victim's face, crushing the victim's toes and feet and application of caustic substances to the skin are all reportedly used to torture detainees. In some cases, a special apparatus is used to inflict torture. For example, there is a device known as al 'Abd al Aswad (the Black Slave) onto which the prisoner is strapped; when the device is activated, it inserts a heated metal skewer into the victim's anus.

AI believes that torture is used systematically in interrogation, both in order to extract confessions and as punishment. The majority of testimonies given to AI by former detainees indicate that torture is most frequently inflicted during the early stages of detention, when detainees are held incommunicado and are undergoing interrogation by the security forces. It is at this stage that torture has been described as at its most brutal, when the interrogation methods used by the security forces have sometimes resulted in permanent physical or mental damage. Some detainees have been repeatedly taken for urgent medical treatment following interrogation. Others have not survived and have died in custody.

Riad al-Turk, 58 year old lawyer and First Secretary of the prohibited Syrian Communist Party-Political Bureau, is reported to have twice been admitted to hospital for intensive care following torture. Riad al-Turk, who has been held without charge or trial since his arrest on 28 October 1980, was admitted to al-Muwassat Hospital in Damascus in February 1981, following severe torture. In January 1982 he was again admitted for intensive care in al-Mezze Military Prison Hospital in Damascus; he was said to be unconscious and to be suffering from severe inflammation of the kidneys and renal failure due to torture. In December 1983 and December

1984 he was reportedly subjected to further bouts of severe torture aggravating his poor state of health. AI has consistently appealed for his immediate and unconditional release from prison as a prisoner of conscience and for any medical care he needs to be made available to him.

As well as being inflicted at the time of arrest, torture is also used before and after transfer from one prison to another. For example, testimonies given to AI describe brutal treatment being inflicted on prisoners arriving at Tadmur Military Prison. Each prisoner was beaten on the feet and body - as many as 400 times according to one testimony. Ill-treatment is reported to continue throughout the prisoner's stay at Tadmur and as a result, most detainees there are said to suffer particularly from swollen hands, feet and faces, flayed skin (particularly on the back), broken teeth and episodes of fainting. They are reported to suffer persistent psychological distress both as a consequence of their own treatment and also from having to watch others being ill-treated or hearing their screams.

Prisoners protesting at their conditions or continued detention without trial are liable to be tortured. For example, Ghassan Najjar, a 48 year old mechanical engineer from Aleppo, was arrested in April 1980 after participating in a one day strike on 31 March 1980. [The strike, organized by a number of professional associations, including the Engineering and Medical Associations, was called to press for an end to State of Emergency provisions which have been in force since 1963.] In June 1984 he began a hunger strike to protest his detention but abandoned it after being beaten by guards; he required medical treatment at al-Muwassat Hospital as a result. In 1985 he embarked on another hunger strike in protest against prison conditions. In October 1986 he was reported to be suffering from a spinal injury and gastric ulcers - gastric bleeding was also reported - and to have suffered a myocardial infarct. He was said not to be receiving adequate medical care.

#### Deaths in custody

AI believes that several prisoners have died in recent years as a result of torture, routine ill-treatment, or neglect. Although AI has not been able to verify every reported death, it has urged the Syrian authorities to investigate a number of cases and to make the findings public. AI has received no response to these appeals and it appears that attempts are made to conceal the cause of death in some cases by claiming, for example, that the victim committed suicide.

A number of cases known to AI are summarized in the Table below. Reasons for their arrest range from distribution of leaflets to membership of the Palestinian organization, Fatah; all are reported to have died as a direct result of torture. In some cases the bodies were returned to the families with instruction to bury the body immediately without holding a funeral. Details of the cases are given in the AI publication, Syria: Torture by the Security Forces.

Prisoners held by Syrian forces in Lebanon have also died under torture. They include Jibril Idlibi, a student studying medicine in the USA, who was in Tripoli at the end of 1986. He was arrested in the last week of December after being wounded in clashes between Syrian forces and members of al-Tawhid al-Islami (Islamic Unification) and was taken to the American School (Madrasat al-Amrican) for interrogation. According to reports, his

body was found the following day in the Islamic Hospital in Tripoli. He was reported to have died under torture.

Table: Some deaths in detention in Syria, 1983-86

Name	Age	Arrested	Died
Amin Nassur	Student	Oct 1980	April 1983
Ahmad Mahdi	28	Mar 1980	April 1984
Ahmad al-Kabra	43	early 85	first half 85
Misbah 'Abd al-Haq	60	early 85	April 1986
Mustaffa Mahmud Hussain al-Khouri	50	July 1985	*
Yahya Ahmad 'Abd al-Hafidh	35	*	Jan 1986
Sulaiman Mustafa Ghaibur	*	March 1986 [twice]	April/May 86

\* Information not available to AI

#### Medical treatment

Detainees in the custody of the security forces are routinely denied the right to receive a prompt medical examination upon arrest. Requests to see a doctor or to have a medical examination thereafter are most often refused.

Medical facilities are reported to be minimal in most Syrian prisons, and totally inadequate in some. There is usually only one doctor in each prison, whose visits to detainees are said to be infrequent and irregular. In some prisons, the doctor may only be present once or twice a week. Prison doctors are generally said to be ill-equipped to treat detainees suffering from injuries or diseases requiring specialized medical care or hospital treatment. Medicines for detainees in prisons such as al-Mezze Military Prison or 'Adra Civil Prison have to be obtained outside and brought in by visiting relatives. Political detainees' requests for outside medical treatment must be approved by the branch of the security forces in charge of their custody and are invariably denied. According to Amnesty International's information, political detainees are generally only admitted to hospital when they are in a critical condition and in need of urgent medical care, usually after torture. In such cases they have been registered in hospitals under false names, which has made it difficult for their relatives to trace them.

In Tadmur Military Prison, official medical care is said to be virtually non-existent. Detainees who need medical treatment, including those suffering from wounds or injuries inflicted through torture, are reportedly not examined by a doctor for several months at a time. Wounds sustained during the "reception" upon arrival at the prison or through the subsequent routine ill-treatment, become inflamed and purulent after prolonged neglect. In the absence of adequate medical care, complications

develop. Consequently, detainees have reportedly been treated by fellow inmates who have medical training. According to one doctor's testimony, festering wounds have been treated with vinegar extracted from fermented apples or grapes, as well as a lotion produced from tetracycline capsules. Other injuries inflicted through torture, and which inmates have attempted to treat, are said to include severe and festering burns; fractured limbs and ribs resulting from beating with metal implements; severe bruising and sharp pains in the back caused by guards kicking detainees and jumping on their backs; hemiplegia; stiffness of the joints and chronic arthritis; osteomyelitis; and various injuries caused by repeated blows to the head and face including broken teeth, inflammation of the middle ear and perforation of the eardrum (leading to partial or total deafness) and eye injuries and diseases (leading to partial or total blindness).

Amnesty International does not have detailed information about medical facilities in detention and interrogation centres. However, at Fara' al-Tahqiq al-'Askari in Damascus, there are reportedly two doctors and at least one male nurse who examine detainees every one or two days. During their visits, the doctors allegedly try to persuade the detainees to "cooperate" with the interrogators in order to save their lives. Their main role has been described as treating detainees for wounds and injuries inflicted through torture after each interrogation session, particularly those whom the interrogators have been instructed to keep alive. At Fara' Falastin, a male nurse is said to visit the detainees every evening. According to one former detainee, the only medicines detainees could obtain from the nurse were tablets such as aspirin or ampicillin, irrespective of their condition.

Detainees in Syria's prisons and detention centres are also said to suffer from a wide variety of diseases, often caused by a combination of poor diet, appalling prison conditions, inadequate medical care and routine ill-treatment. These conditions also lead to the deterioration in the health of detainees who suffered illnesses before their arrest. Lice and scabies are said to be rife in prisons and detention centres due to filthy conditions in the overcrowded cells. Other common complaints include chronic diarrhoea caused by contaminated food and poor hygiene, anaemia resulting from poor diets over prolonged periods, and stomach ulcers caused by stress and exacerbated by poor diets. A number of detainees with ulcers have suffered gastric bleeding. In Tadmur Military Prison detainees are said to suffer from a variety of other diseases, including infectious gastro-intestinal diseases such as typhoid, cholera and dysentery; chest diseases such as pulmonary tuberculosis; heart diseases; various skin diseases and stress-related problems such as ulcers and alopecia. Serious mental disorders are said to include schizophrenia and depression.

Over the years Amnesty International has sent numerous appeals to the Syrian authorities on behalf of detainees who were reported to be seriously ill and were being denied adequate medical care. One of them, a novelist from al-Raqqa named Muhammad Haitham Khoja, who was adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience, died at the end of June 1987 at the age of 35. He had been arrested in October 1980 for membership of the prohibited Communist Party Political Bureau, and detained without trial in Aleppo Central Prison. Amnesty International issued urgent appeals on his behalf in July 1985 and again in April 1986 after receiving reports that he was suffering from chronic inflammation of the kidneys, as well as trachoma. The Syrian authorities did not respond to the organization's appeals that he receive the medical treatment he needed. He was released

in early June 1987 in poor health and was admitted to a hospital in Aleppo around 21 June. He died three days later.

Other detainees on whose behalf Amnesty International has appealed for medical treatment are listed below. Most of them have been detained without trial since their arrest and have been adopted by the organization as prisoners of conscience.

Munif Mulhim was born in 1950 in Homs. He was arrested in August 1981 and detained in Tadmur Military Prison without charge or trial. In August 1984 he was reported to be suffering from a malignant genital tumour.

'Abbas 'Abbas was born in 1938 in Misyaf, Province of Hama. He was arrested in January 1982 and detained in Tadmur Military Prison without charge or trial. In June 1985 he was reported to be suffering from peritonitis.

Safwan 'Akkash was born in 1953 in Hama. He was arrested in February 1983 and detained in Shaikh Hassan Prison, Damascus, without charge or trial. In June 1985 he was reported to be suffering from renal failure.

Husam 'Allush was born in 1952 in Hama. He was arrested in April 1980 and detained in Tadmur Military Prison without charge or trial. In June 1985 he was reported to be suffering from spinal osteoarthritis and an intervertebral disc lesion.

Jaffan Humsi was born in 1959 in Hama. He was arrested in April 1980 and detained in Tadmur Military Prison without charge or trial. In June 1985 he was reported to be suffering from nephritis.

Hind Qahwaji was born in 1956, in Tal al-Nin. She was arrested in March 1984 and detained in Qatana Women's Prison without charge or trial. In June 1985 she was reported to be suffering from asthma.

Wa'il Sawwah was born in 1955, in Homs. He was arrested in August 1981 and detained in Tadmur Military Prison without charge or trial. In June 1985 he was reported to be suffering from a pulmonary disease.

'Abd al-Majid Manjouneh was born in 1938. He was arrested in April 1980 and detained in 'Adra Civil Prison, Damascus, without charge or trial. In December 1985 he was reported to be suffering from rheumatism of the vertebral column, an intervertebral disc lesion in the lumbar region, diabetes and nephritis.

Husain Tahir Zaidan was born around 1954 in Idlib. He was arrested in May 1970 and has remained in detention in al-Mezze Military Prison, following the expiry of his 15-year sentence in May 1985. In February 1986 he was reported to be in poor health and suffering from diabetes.

Mahmud Muhammad al-Fayyad was born around 1931 in Dar'a. He was arrested in May 1970 and has remained in detention in al-Mezze Military Prison, following the expiry of his 15-year sentence in May 1985. In February 1986 he was reported to be suffering from a number

of ailments including a gastric ulcer and inflammation of the oesophagus.

Jalal al-Din Mustafa Mirhij was born around 1934 in Qunaitra. He was arrested in May 1970 and has remained in detention in al-Mezze Military Prison following the expiry of his 15-year sentence in May 1985. In February 1986 he was reported to be suffering from kidney stones and in need of hospital treatment.

Mahmud Jalbut is a Palestinian, born in 1954. He was arrested in October 1980 and detained in 'Adra Civil Prison without charge or trial. In March 1986 he was reported to be suffering from a stomach haemorrhage and to be in a critical condition.

Amnesty International continues to seek information about the fate of these prisoners and to work for their release from prison. The organization has repeatedly requested meetings with the Syrian authorities to discuss these and other cases and its wider concerns. So far, the Syrian Government has not responded to AI's requests.

### Conclusion

In view of the evidence indicating that torture is used systematically in Syria, Amnesty International has made nine recommendations to the Syrian government. These cover the need for government compliance with international instruments; for an end to indefinite incommunicado detention and to the use of secret detention centres; for a separation between powers of detention and interrogation; for regular and independent visits of inspection to places of detention; for an impartial and independent investigation of allegations of torture; for the implementation of UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners; for the adoption of a code of conduct for officials in accordance with the United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials. The recommendations are given in detail in Syria: Torture by the Security Forces.