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Mauritania: The Human Rights Council cannot ignore the systematic use of torture

A few days away from the review of Mauritania by the Working group of the Human Rights Council as part of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which will take place in Geneva on 10 November, Mauritania must commit itself to an immediate end to torture and ill-treatment.

The Human Rights Council, of which Mauritania is currently a member, cannot ignore the very serious violations committed in detention centres by one of its members.

An Amnesty International delegation, which carried out an investigation in Mauritania in September and October 2010, established that the security forces continue to systematically use torture and ill-treatment and that conditions of detention in several prisons remain deplorable.

Torture continues to be used as a method of investigation and repression against all types of detainees in Mauritania, men and women, alleged Islamists and people arrested for common-law offences.

The Amnesty International delegation met dozens of detainees in several detention centres in Nouakchott, the capital, and Nouadhibou (approximately 500 km to the north of the capital) as well as recently released people who have complained about torture and ill-treatment.

One detainee, born in 1984 and arrested in April 2010 for alleged links with Islamists told Amnesty International:

"A big police officer slapped me a few times and handcuffed my hands behind my back. He bound my feet together and then tied my feet to my hands behind my back so that my body was completely bent backwards. He lifted my head up and hit me for a long time with a hosepipe. He also hit me on the soles of my feet. After this torture, I admitted to everything he told me to."

Women detained in police custody are not spared such practices. Amnesty International met several women who were ill-treated after being detained in police custody.

One of them, arrested in June 2010 on charges of drug trafficking, said:

"At the anti-drugs brigade, police officers told me to undress. I told them I had no underwear on but they forcibly removed my clothes. They then blindfolded me, handcuffed my hands behind my back, tied them to my feet and began to hit me with their truncheons."

In addition, conditions at several detention centres are still comparable with forms of torture and ill-treatment. Amnesty International is particularly concerned about the health situation at Dar Naïm prison, near Nouakchott. Built to house 350 detainees, this prison held 1046 prisoners at the time of the delegation's visit. Twelve detainees have died since the beginning of the year in this prison, eight of them since 26 September, apparently due to illness. When

the delegation discussed the situation with the authorities, it deplored the absence of regular medical care in detention centres.

Prisoners detained at Nouakchott and Nouadhibou are squeezed together in their cells in what is often stifling heat. These prisoners are almost never allowed to leave their cell or have access to fresh air, often for months, sometimes for years.

The guards often hit prisoners. This ill-treatment is inflicted on detainees who quarrel with each other, or following proven or alleged attempts to escape or simply at the whim of the guards.

Detainees accused of trying to escape in December 2008 told Amnesty International:

"The guards beat up everybody suspected of wanting to escape. They put chains around our feet, like slaves in the old days. They tied the chains to our arms, forcing our chest forward. They beat us in this position for more than two hours, while other guards regularly threw water in our faces. The guards hit us with electric cables and braided rope."

Amnesty International has gathered information on the death of at least one detainee who died as a result of torture in 2009. This was Ousseyni Wellé, a Senegalese national aged 37 and condemned to death in 2008. One of his co-detainees told Amnesty International: *"Wellé was ill when he was taken from the disciplinary cell where he had been put after being beaten. The day before his death, he was taken to hospital but he didn't stay there. He was spitting blood on his return to prison, his elbows and knees were covered in blood and he had to be helped to walk. He died a few days later."*

Basing itself on this information, Amnesty International believes that the Human Rights Council cannot ignore the disquieting human rights situation in Mauritania. The organisation strongly reiterates here the recommendations already made to the Human Rights Council in April 2010 (*Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review*, AI Index AFR 38/001/2010), especially those requesting the Mauritanian government to:

- Draw up a plan of action against torture and ill-treatment with a view to their eradication and bring to justice all suspected perpetrators of these acts. To make any act of torture or ill-treatment a criminal offence and make provision for penalties that reflect the gravity of the nature of the act;
- Open an investigation into the last five deaths in October 2010 in Dar Naïm prison;
- Ensure that all detainees can contact their family, a lawyer and doctor without delay after their arrest and regularly throughout the period of their detention or imprisonment;
- Place the management of prison and penal institutions under the effective and appropriate control of the Ministry of Justice.