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TORTURE IN ETHIOPIA

“No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment”. (art.5/ Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

“ All forms of exploitation and degradation of man, particularly slavery, slave trade, torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment an treatment, shall be prohibited (Article 5/ African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights)

The regime in power in Ethiopia claims to accept these and other UN conventions against torture, and cruel and inhuman punishments. However, it tramples on these laws and has continued to systematically and routinely torture prisoners (political and penal or common law prisoners). Testimonies are many. But first of all what constitutes torture?

In the Ethiopian context, we can cite the following:

- Cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions of detention;
- Solitary confinement and deprivation of food and medical care;
- Wefe Illala or beating the soles of the feet; whipping with electric wire and beating with rubber truncheons;
- Shacking legs and keeping prisoners isolated in dark and stinking cells;
- Rape and mutilation of genitalia;
- Pulling out nails by pincers, stubbing lit cigarettes on bodies, burning newspapers on bodies, stuffing rags soaked in urine and covered with feces into the mouths of prisoners being beaten so as to gag them;
- Violence against women; throwing acids, beating and mutilation;
- Electric torture; using knives to slice of the flesh of prisoners;



(Tortured citizens in war torn Ogaden)

Torture as a means of war is practiced in the Ogaden and many other regions. The Meles regime has denied any torture takes place anywhere in Ethiopia just as it has denied there is even one political prisoner in the whole country (there are close to 35,000). Beating and pistol whipping or attacking detainees with the butts of rifles is a common practice long before the prisoner has been moved to the cells and interrogation centers. Here is how one victim presented his case:

“I was just coming out of my work place when three men in civilian clothes jumped of a parked car and accosted me. After I identified myself one of them punched me while another pulled out a pistol and crushed my nose with it. I lost consciousness but they did not stop beating me. I had a broken nose, two front teeth broken and broken rib by the time they threw me into the car and took me to a cell. I got some medical attention after three days. I was tortured in prison too and only interrogated on the fifth day. I was beaten by rubber truncheons, kicks on my testicles, etc... ” .

Torture is routine in Ethiopia. It is practiced to obtain information and/or to punish the prisoner and to damage him/her physically and psychologically. A number of prisoners have their hands paralyzed and/or broken from beatings and being tied for long by plastic ropes which block blood circulation in the arms. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council had over the years published photos of such victims. The tortures take place in official (Maekelawi, etc) and secret prisons (of which many exist in Addis Ababa and Tigray), in military camps turned into detention centers, in the known concentration camps (Zwai, Dedesa, Bir Sheleko, etc), in police stations. Torture victims are varied. People arrested for alleged common law or penal crimes are beaten routinely to get their confessions. Journalists, critics, dissidents, alleged members of opposition organizations and fronts, captured guerrillas, etc—political prisoners—are often tortured unless they are famous and beating them or incapacitating them would expose the regime. Even then, the leaders of CUD, the

Ethiopian Teachers' Association, and known journalists like the recently arrested Woubshet Taye have all been tortured in one way or another.



A prisoner called Daniel had this to say:

“Interrogation starts with beating; they would tie your hands and feet with iron and hang you upside down. They immerse you in water, they would use electric shocks. They stuffed your mouth so no one can hear you scream.”

A pregnant woman in the Ogaden had this to say:

“A woman described how she was eight months pregnant when government forces arrested her, then raped and beat her until she lost her baby. She described being taken to a shack, usually used as a resting place for a senior soldier, where she was brutally attacked. A man jumped on her stomach and she was hit with the butt of a rifle until they killed her unborn child. She was raped until she lost consciousness. The woman described seeing a man who was also being held by the government forces who had been tortured so badly ‘his tongue and eyes were out. And also a girl was in with me I think she was about 16 years old, she was also beaten, raped and sliced and she was in a coma and could not talk”.

Detention in underground narrow cells is common in the Tigrai/Gondar underground prisons where people are fed hardly once in 24 hours and denied to urinate or relieve themselves. Overcrowded cells, urinating in pails and plastic bags, generally unhealthy conditions of detention, forcing prisoners to sleep on cold and bare cement floors, sleep deprivation are all common in the prisons of Meles Zenawi. Widespread discrimination (political and ethnic) has made torture systematic, routine and wide spread. Underage children have been jailed in the Maekelawi, in Chilga and other provinces, in many Oromo areas and in the Ogaden so as to force their parents to surrender or to leave the armed groups. It is not known how many prisoners have died from their torture wounds but conservative estimates foreword the hundreds figure. Prisoners are also held incommunicado in dark cells, denied access to lawyers, shackled and tied from the roof beams for long periods, denied toilet facilities and medical care. A number of prisoners have died from lack of proper medical care. Sadly enough, international bodies have not made serious effort to pressurize the regime to let them visit the official and secret prisons. Dangerous as it is, victims of torture living in Ethiopia can be approached discreetly to gather their testimonies. A classified cable by the former US ambassador to Ethiopia, Mr. Donald Yamamoto revealed by Wikileaks stated the following:

“Recent interviews with individuals who have been held in non-traditional detention facilities have shed anecdotal light on beatings and abuse by Ethiopian security officials against civilians in country. While we cannot confirm the scope or persistence of such mistreatment, these first-hand reports do offer a unique insight into abuse of detainees and dynamics regarding Ethiopia’s non-traditional detention facilities. A handful of released political and other prisoners in Ethiopia have recently reported to PolOff that they and other detainees have been tortured in police station jails in attempts by security officials to elicit confessions before cases go to trial. Depending on the detainee, abuses reported include being blindfolded and hung by the wrists for several hours, bound by chains and

beaten, held in solitary confinement for several days to weeks or months, subjected to mental torture such as harassment and humiliation, forced to stand for over 16 hours, and having heavy objects hung from one's genitalia (males). Based on what our sources have reported, torture seems to be more common at police station detention centers (most notably Maekelawi police station in Addis Ababa), while less is reported at Kaliti prison. Released prisoners have also reported to PolOff cases of prisoners being detained for several years without being charged and without trial, prisoners held in jails despite having been released by the courts, and police interference with court proceedings”.

The constitution of the regime itself prohibits torture but the practice is different—torture is systematic, cruel and rampant in Ethiopia. Added to this is the increased instance of domestic violence (beatings, rape and throwing acid at women's faces) which is spawned by the regime's policy of violence, child prostitution, corruption and degeneracy by top and powerful officials. SOCEPP denounces the Meles regime for illegally detaining and torturing political prisoners and innocent civilians based on political and ethnic discrimination and repression. SOCEPP also calls on those who aid and abet this regime to stop doing so and to call for an end to the systematic torture of all political prisoners. Prison observatory bodies should also make visits of prisons in Ethiopia an urgent task.

STOP Torture in Ethiopia!

Release all political prisoners in Ethiopia!!

INJUSTICE ANYWHERE IS INJUSTICE EVERYWHERE
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