

Thousands Who Protested Peacefully Languish in Syrian Jails

Tens of thousands of people who peacefully demonstrated against President Bashar Assad are languishing in Syrian jails and are subjected to an apparent policy of torture, according to New York-based Human Rights Watch.

Citing testimony from former prisoners, HRW said in a report that detainees have been raped and abused, including with electric shocks to the genitals, and beaten with batons, cables, metal rods and wires.

The report said rebel forces now fighting to overthrow Assad have also committed abuses by detaining journalists, humanitarian workers and civilian activists, and that they had executed some prisoners.

“Behind the awful brutality of the fighting in Syria is the unseen abuse of political detainees—arrested, tortured, and even killed for peacefully criticizing the government or helping people in need,” said Joe Stork, acting Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch (HRW).

“Arbitrary detention and torture have become business as usual for Syrian security forces,” said the report, which HRW said aimed to draw attention to civilian activists held in at least 27 prisons across Syria.

The report said many were in jail just for criticizing the authorities or for providing medical help for victims of the violent crackdown on protesters in 2011 that helped turn a civilian uprising into a civil war.

It said the use of torture appeared to be systematic and there

was “strong evidence” that it constitutes state policy and a crime against humanity. Most detainees have been men but women and children “have not been spared”, it said.

The HRW report cited figures by the Violations Documentation Center, a Syrian opposition monitoring group, that 1,200 people had died in Syrian prisons since the uprising began.

“The authorities jail political detainees for months without charge, and torture, mistreat, and prevent them from communicating with their lawyers or families, leaving their families desperate to know what has happened to them,” it said.

Syrian authorities decline comment on individual prisoners but deny holding political prisoners and say many of those arrested during the uprising violated laws against terrorism.

HRW highlighted 21 individual cases, including 34-year-old Yehia Shorbaji, a construction worker from a Damascus suburb who became known as “the man with the roses” for having presented flowers to soldiers in the first months of the uprising.

Security forces arrested Shorbaji along with his brother Mohammed and three other activists in a group called Daraya Youth in September 2011, according to HRW.

“Government officials have refused to give Shorbaji’s family any information about him. One of the five, Ghiyath Matar, died in custody within days of his arrest,” the report said.

Among prominent activists in jail are Khalil Maatouk, a Christian human rights lawyer, and Mazen Darwish, head of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression.

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