

As High Court deliberates on torture, human rights groups say it's on the rise

By Amira Hass, Ha'aretz Palestinian Affairs Correspondent

While the High Court of Justice deliberates the use of torture by Israeli security, human rights activists involved in anti-torture efforts say they have observed a rise in the number of torture episodes.

Activists say that over the last two to three months suspects have reported an increase in the intensity of the torture they are subject to.

The rights groups add that prisoners have been forbidden to see lawyers for longer periods of time and that there has been a spate of administrative detainees who undergo interrogation and then are returned to detention; an increase in the number of convicts who serve their full sentences and are immediately placed in administrative detention; and an increase in the number of suspects pressured to turn into collaborators in return for their freedom.

Activists from the Israeli Public Committee Against Torture (PCAT) and from A-Damir, a Palestinian organization that supports prisoners, say they have spotted an increase in the number of cases where the Shin Bet prevents arrested suspects from meeting with lawyers for protracted periods of time.

While a security ordinance allows the Shin Bet to deny a suspect a lawyer for up to 90 days, as long as there are the appropriate clearances from senior commanders and military judges, it is rarely used. But lately, according to PCAT's Hanna Friedman and Halda Gerar from A-Damir, the ordinance is being used more frequently to deny lawyer-client meetings for particularly long periods of time.

Thus, Sharif Dudeen, from Dura, who was arrested at the end of January, has not been allowed to see a lawyer since his arrest. An urgent appeal to the High Court of Justice on his behalf was rejected.

Khaled Fakusa, also from Dura, has been in detention since February 5; he was allowed to meet with his lawyer only at the end of March.

Isa Batat was arrested at the end of February and was denied a lawyer's visit for 28 days. During the same period, another five members of his family were arrested; two have been released so far without being charged.

According to testimony gathered by A-Damir and PCAT, there has also been an increase in the intensity of torture used by the Shin Bet. Lawyers Gerar and Friedman say the change has taken place since January's High Court session regarding Shin Bet torture.

According to a statement from prisoner Isa Batat, for example, he was shackled to a small chair for several days during his interrogation and forced to bend over backward while his legs were tied under the chair. If he fell, the interrogators would stand on his feet to make him get up.

He was also put on a table with an object under his back. While one interrogator held his legs, another pushed down on his shoulders, as if to break his back.

The handcuffs he was made to wear were also tightly closed, preventing circulation in his hands - despite promises from Shai Nitzan, a representative of the State Attorney's Office, who said the handcuffs would be replaced.

Prisoner Mouna Ka'adan from Ya'bed, who was released at the end of March after 28 days in detention - during which she went on a hunger strike - reported that she was held for five days in the position known as the Shabah, which means sitting on a chair with hands and legs shackled, head covered by a sack or with dark glasses, and non-stop music played to prevent sleep.

Attorney Tamar Peleg, from the **Moked Center for the Defense of the Individual**, says she has also noted changes in the treatment of administrative detainees, saying administrative detention is on the increase. At least a quarter of the 80 detainees at Megiddo prison, she says, underwent Shin Bet interrogations and then were returned to administrative detention.

Furthermore, she says, there's been an increase in the number of people who during interrogation are offered freedom in exchange for their cooperation as informants.

There has also been an increase in the number of convicts who are placed in administrative detention upon their release from jail.

The most famous of these is Salah Shehade of Gaza's Beit Hanoun, who was convicted for his role in the establishment of the Hamas and was supposed to get out of jail six months ago, but has since been in administrative

detention.

Aviv Bushinski, spokesman for the prime minister, said that "the Shin Bet does not make a custom of using the media to explain its activities, which are supervised. The address for complaints of this kind are well-known to the lawyers and complaints are dealt with upon their receipt.

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