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TESTIMONY

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Life in Syria's Saydnaya Prison; a human slaughterhouse

Saydnaya Military Prison is a human slaughterhouse. Since 2011, thousands of people have been extrajudicially executed at Saydnaya in mass hangings, carried out at night and in the utmost secrecy. Many other detainees at Saydnaya have been killed after being repeatedly tortured and systematically deprived of food, water, medicine and medical care.

Amnesty International interviewed 31 men who were detained at Saydnaya, four prison officials or guards who previously worked at Saydnaya, three Syrian former judges, three doctors who worked at Tishreen Military Hospital, four Syrian lawyers, 17 international and national experts on detention in Syria and 22 family members of people who were or still are detained at Saydnaya.

Names have been changed to protect identities.

1) EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTIONS

Research carried out by Amnesty International has revealed that as many as 13,000 people were executed in Saydnaya between September 2011 and December 2015, in horrific mass hangings. Although Amnesty International does not have evidence of executions after December 2015, detainees are still being transferred to Saydnaya, “trials” at the Military Field Court in al-Qaboun have continued, and there is no reason to believe that executions have stopped. Therefore, since December 2015, thousands more people are likely to have been executed.

“Trials” at the Military Field Court

Detainees who are extrajudicially executed at Saydnaya first undergo a “trial” before a Military Field Court.

A former judge from the Military Court described the process:

[The Military Field Court is] not obligated to follow the Syrian legal system at all. It's outside of the rules... The detainees spend a very short time there – one or two minutes – and then they are sent out. The judge will ask the name of the detainee and whether he committed the crime. Whether the answer is yes or no, he will be convicted... This court has no relation with the rule of law. This is not a court.

According to a former Saydnaya official:

If the confession is heavy, then you are sent to the Field Court... For everybody – without exception – the confession was given under torture. Of course they torture people so that they confess to a higher charge.

“Ziyad”, an IT specialist from Homs, who was “tried” at the Military Field Court, said:

Of course [the trial] wasn't fair, not at all. Anything about justice or fairness was not present. You are blindfolded and handcuffed, so you don't know who the judge is, or what you signed. Of course this isn't justice.

“Nader”, a businessman from Damascus, agreed:

I spent one minute in front of the judge and a guard from the military police... I went in with 45 other detainees, and they had finished everyone's cases in one hour. They don't tell you your charges. You don't have a right to a lawyer or to speak on the phone. You have no rights.”

Collection process

Detainees at Saydnaya who are condemned to death are collected from their cells in the afternoon and are told that they will be transferred to one of the civilian prisons inside of Syria. Instead, they are taken to a cell in the basement, where they are held until the middle of the night and are severely beaten.

A prison guard described the collection process:

We go to collect the prisoners, and the officer's assistant comes with us. He has a list with all the names of the people. Then we open the door of the group room. Automatically the detainees are kneeling, facing the wall and covering their eyes. We call a detainee's name, and he pulls his T-shirt over his face... We put them in a row and they move in the “train” position... We collect them this way, and we take them to the room downstairs... It's forbidden for them to sit down – they stay standing. And we start shouting at them... We start beating them... We already know they will die anyway, so we do whatever we want with them.

Prisoners described overhearing the beatings of those scheduled for execution.

“Nader” said:

[W]e would hear a huge sound. From 10pm until 12am, or from 11pm until 1am we would hear screaming and yelling, coming from below us... This is a very important point. If you keep silent, you will get less beating at Saydnaya. But these people were screaming like they had lost their minds... It wasn't a normal sound – it was not ordinary. It sounded like they were skinning them alive.

Mass hangings

Detainees do not know that they are going to be executed until the very last minute. On entering the execution room detainees, still blindfolded, are ordered to express their last wishes and place a fingerprint on a statement documenting their death.

According to a former prison official:

Some of them were silent after they put their fingerprint on the paper, and some of them just fainted right there. But they didn't know when it would happen or how it was going to happen – by hanging, shooting or some other way.

After this, the detainees are led on to the platforms, still blindfolded. The former prison official said:

They would line them up and get them ready for the execution. They would wait until all of spaces were full before they put the noose on. Then they would put the noose on and push them or drop them immediately, so they didn't know what was happening until the very last moment.

A former judge from the Military Court added:

They kept them [hanging] there for 10 to 15 minutes. Some didn't die because they are light. For the young ones, their weight wouldn't kill them. The officers' assistants would pull them down and break their necks.

Detainees held in the building in the floors above the “execution room” reported that they sometimes heard the sounds of these hangings.

“Hamid”, a former military officer arrested in 2011, said:

If you put your ears on the floor, you could hear the sound of a kind of gurgling. This would last around 10 minutes... We were sleeping on top of the sound of people choking to death. This was normal for me then.

2) EXTERMINATION POLICIES

According to former Saydnaya detainees, deaths occurred in their cells or wings on a weekly and sometimes daily basis, as a result of disease, thirst, malnutrition and injuries sustained during beatings and torture.

Former detainee “Kareem” explained what happened to the bodies:

During that period [between February and June 2014], one person from the cell would die each day. We would put the body in a blanket by the door. The guard would come in the morning. The shawish [prisoner in charge of the cell] would have to say “ready sir”. The guard would always say, “Do you have a carcass?” And then the shawish would just say, again, “ready, sir”. Then they would take away the body.

“Nader” added:

Every day there would be two or three dead people in our wing... I remember the guards would ask how many we had. He would say, “Room number one – how many? Room number two – how many?” and on and on... There was one time that nobody died for three days [in our wing], and the guards came to us, room by room, and beat us on the head, chest and neck. Thirteen people from our wing died that day.