

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Political Opponents Swept Up by Security Apparatus Beyond Legal Oversight

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Ugandan security forces are torturing supporters of the political opposition and holding them in secret detention amid the governments pursuit of rebels involved in the countrys armed conflict, Human Rights Watch said in a new report released today.

The 76-page report, State of Pain: Torture in Uganda, documents cases of torture committed by military, intelligence, and security agents in the governments pursuit of armed rebels. However, politicians challenging the de facto single-party state and the 18-year rule of Ugandas president, Yoweri Museveni, are often detained, severely beaten and threatened with death by the uncontrolled security apparatus.

Uganda set up a shadow sector of security operations to contend with armed rebel groups and crime waves, said Jemera Rone, Uganda researcher for the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch, But now, the security system serves to punish and deter political opposition by detaining and torturing supporters of the political opposition.

Military intelligence and security forces reportedly have suspended victims from the ceiling for hours or days in a position called kandoya (with their hands and feet tied behind their back), beaten them severely with wooden or metal rods, cables, hammers or sticks studded with protruding nails, and subjected them to water torture in which the victim is forced to lie face up while a water spigot is opened directly into his mouth.

In 2001 the government established a system of covert safe housesunacknowledged and illegal places of detentionto hold persons suspected of supporting opposition politicians or rebels, groups that often merge in the minds of security officials. With no real oversight by the Ugandan judiciary and no access given to Ugandan government human rights officials, these places of detention facilitate torture and other abuses by shielding abusers from scrutiny.

Individuals have been held incommunicado in such places with no contact with family members or lawyersometimes for months. They have been denied medical care despite severe injuries, kept blindfolded so they cannot later identify their torturers and interrogators, and threatened with retaliation if they talk about their torture. The constitutional requirement that criminal charges be brought within 48 hours of detention or the suspect released is rarely honored in these cases, so that fresh marks of torture can fade and the suspect can be coerced to sign a confession.

People are swept up into a security apparatus that is operating outside the law, said Rone, Ugandas security system has served to keep victims of the governments abuse silent and its perpetrators immune from punishment.

The only mitigating mechanism for detainees is the writ of habeas corpus, a legal procedure usually available only to persons who can afford attorneys. The writ requires authorities to produce the suspect in court. Afterwards, the government usually quickly brings criminal charges for treason or terrorism to justify further detention. However, it must then transfer the accused to prison, where torture does not appear to occur.

Reforms by the government and within the Ugandan justice system are needed to stop torture and end rampant impunity in Ugandas military, security and intelligence services. Human Rights Watch called on the government to disband security services that are outside parliamentary oversight, to start conducting medical examinations of suspects when they are first taken into custody, to stop using illegal places of detention, and to rescind the policy of prolonged incommunicado detention. The courts should enforce the constitutional requirement to promptly charge or release all detainees held 48 hours, and that all confessions be voluntary.

Unlawful Detention and Abuse in Unauthorized Places of Detention in Uganda

The Special Criminal Court, a New Opportunity for Victims in the Central African Republic

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