

Report on torture and inhuman treatment in the Georgian penitentiary system

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Introduction

In September 2012, Georgia was rocked by a massive prison scandal when video was broadcasted showing prison staff abusing, torturing and sexually molesting prisoners. The scandal had a great impact on the political climate in the country, in particular because over the years a lot of investments had been made in the penitentiary system. However, the real scope of the problem became only clear later that year and new facts are still being revealed every day.

In 2012, the Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation (GCRT) provided assistance to 564 victims of torture and their families in 4 regions of Georgia – Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi, Gori. Out of the total number of patients, not less than 353 were submitted to torture in penitentiary facilities in Georgia.

In this document we would like to provide individual reports from various clients to demonstrate the graveness and the extent of torture that was practiced in the Georgian penitentiary system. In the end we would also like to highlight a particularly disturbing element in this system of torture: the active participation of medical personnel in gross violation of the Hippocratic Oath.

The cases we describe here are illustrative of the Georgian penitentiary system over the last several years – in the era of democratic reforms. Unfortunately out of fear of being subjected to further and more grave torture, only few dared to speak out and as a result a small portion of facts was known to human rights organisations.

Case-studies

Torture was inflicted not only by regular prison guards, but equally by persons higher up in the chain of command, all the way up to the director himself:

I am 56 years old. I was arrested in December 2009. The first six months I spent in Gldani establishment #8 where I was on numerous occasions severely beaten with batons on the feet, and also with plastic bottles full of water, since they don't leave a trace. During the beatings I lost consciousness several times. Once they beat me

with an iron bed and broke it over me. After that I couldn't move for several weeks. I was then transferred to Ksani establishment #15 and was terribly beaten upon arrival, together with other prisoners. In the summer of 2011 they tried to make me cooperate with them, and when I refused they took me to the "torture chamber". The prison director and his depute were there, both participating in my torture. They put handcuffs on me, hanged me from a tube in the ceiling, first beating me with batons and later starting to use electric currents in my genital area. The torture went on and on and unfortunately I didn't lose consciousness. Two months later I was urgently operated upon and my left testicle was removed. Apart from physical torture I was constantly insulted and threatened, which was even more difficult to endure than the torture itself.

A particularly frightful story is that of a school director from the village in Imereti region Because of its nature we provide it in more details:

I am 34 years old. I was imprisoned in 2010 and released in February 2013. I am a teacher by education, a foreign languages specialist. I was arrested on drug charges, however I can assure you that never ever in my life I have used drugs. At first I was in Gldani establishment #8. I voluntarily chose to be in the cell of so-called "outcasts" [those who do the dirty jobs and are abused and ostracized by other prisoners] because they had the privilege of taking a walk and meeting family members without the protective glass in between. Soon I was moved to the prison hospital, since the administration needed a prisoner who could speak English to communicate with certain prisoners.

Our category of prisoners was often used by administration to provoke other prisoners in order to then punish them. Once the administration told me to put 75 lari into one prisoner's cell. This man had his case in European Court of Human Rights and they wanted to punish him for that and add a prison term. I refused. First they beat me terribly, screaming that I don't have the right to refuse their orders, that I am an outcast, a nobody. Later I was taken to the hospital morgue and tied to a table, lying next to a corpse. I was lying there for the entire day. At some point one man came down, took one of the instruments that is used for autopsy and started breaking my toes, one by one. I was screaming, asking for mercy. Only at night I was untied from the table in the morgue and allowed into my cell. They didn't provide any medical assistance for my fractures. I have difficulties in walking until now.

Once I was punished for watching an opposition TV channel and the doctor of the facility together with the depute director beat me up severely. Later, as an unreliable and non-compliant prisoner I was transferred to "Krit"¹. That is where I spent the last year. The conditions there were unbearable – the prison is very old, humid, dirty, and full of rats. Once, when they took me out for beatings, I asked them not to hit on my head, since I had a head trauma, and they said: "ah, then you can endure beatings on the body" and they started jumping on me from the table. This went on for hours. I had unbearable pain – in my head and because of the toes as well. Once when I asked for mediation they came in with two different rubber batons - one had "Analgin" written on it, the other "Ketonal". They said "Let's see which medication suits you better" and started to beat me. Of course I have never asked for medication again.

¹ Krit (Russian – closed) a high security prison where conditions were unbearable; the Minister of Corrections officially closed down that facility in February 2013

The tortures not only affected adult prisoners, but juvenile prisoners as well. Here are two cases that illustrate what was going on:

I am 21 years old. I was arrested in February 2010 and released in February 2013. As a juvenile i was first placed in a juvenile correctional facility, but when I turned 18 I was transfered to Rustavi establishment #2. That is where hell started. Upon arrival I was taken together with one other prisoner to the director's office and was severely beaten. The director himself was participating. When I fell several men kicked me with heavy boots. When I lost consciousness, they brought me back to my senses by pouring water onto me and then continued to beat me. This went on for hours. Then I was stripped naked and incarcerated in a punishment cell for 15 days. I could barely move and had terrible headaches. After a certain period of time i was moved to "Krit" and spent 2 years there. Periodically men in special force uniforms and armed with rubber batons, helmets and shields would enter the facility. We could hear them coming from our cells and warned others who were further down of what was impending. We were all preparing ourselves for the beatings, so that it wouldn't be so painful. In order not to be beaten I cut my throat, but it did not help. They sticked me up and then beat me as a punishment.

I am 17 years old. I was arrested in June 2012 on the charges of stealing. I was tortured in the Kutaisi pre-trial facility by prison guards and members of the administration. For three days I was placed in the so called "box", a cell of 2 by 2 where you can only stand and it is impossible to move. I had to relieve myself in there as well. I was subsequently moved to a small cell. There was no bed there and had to sleep on the concrete floor. They would regularly pour water onto the floor so I would have to lie on a wet floor. I was regularly beaten, sometimes three times a day – with fists, batons and bottles of water. I was forced to hit the wall with my head. I was also forced to stand in one position with my hands up for long periods of time. I had a head trauma from my childhood and as a result I had some problems with my ear. After the beatings my ear started to hurt terribly but I didn't get any medical assistance. When my condition became unbearable they transferred me to the prison hospital, where they conducted a minor surgery without anesthesia. I jumped off the table from pain in the middle of the operation. This operation didn't help me and I still have terrible pains.

After recording the story of this juvenile in November 2012, he underwent two corrective ear surgeries – one with funds provided by GCRT and a second financed by the Ministry of Corrections.

Torture practices

To start with, the living conditions in penitentiary institutions were clearly sub-standard, with overcrowded prison cells and insanitary conditions. The situation was made worse through restrictions on the satisfaction of physiological needs (absence of toilet, deprivation of right to bathe, deprivation of drinking water and food, etc.). Further hardships were inflicted through a variety of means, such as sensory deprivation (i.e. absence of sounds, light, time), sleep deprivation, total isolation and infliction of extreme temperatures. Prisoners were further subjected to verbal insults and other humiliations, threats (with execution, continuation of torture, harming family members, sexual abuse etc.), and with being forced to attend the torture of fellow inmates.

Recent interviews with former convicts released in 2011-2012 show how wide the range of torture practices in the Georgian penitentiary system was. Convicts

were subjected to beatings and tortured with electric shocks including on sexual organs. There were cases of sexual abuse and sexual violence. Prisoners were hanged on chains with handcuffs or forced to stay in physiologically impossible conditions, i.e. staying on feet for several hours without the right to move, and if someone would accidentally ruin that pose the whole prison cell would be punished. Others were forced to stand on one foot for several hours or to stay unmoved under the bed. Wounds were inflicted on prisoners while being tied up. When a prisoner would ask for a dentist or pain killer because of tooth pain he would be spit in the mouth, and when medication was requested prison officers used sticks with the names of various medicines on them to beat the prisoner. Prisoners were kept naked, others were urinated upon. The list is endless.

Involvement of physicians

What is particularly disturbing is the involvement of medical personnel in the torture sessions, both by attending and by direct participation. Many convicts refer to physicians having either attended torture sessions, screaming at prisoners, or having inflicted torture themselves. There are especially harrowing reports, e.g. that while medical doctors were busy stitching the self-inflicted injuries of a prisoner, prison guards were beating the very same patient in front of these physicians. All these reports indicate gross violations of medical ethics and should be carefully investigated. In cases when proved the persons concerned should be held criminally responsible and stripped of their medical license.

The Survivors

As a result of experienced torture, the victims suffer from various, severe mental health and somatic disorders. The aim of torture is to destroy the very core of a human being, to fragment and disintegrate the personality beyond repair, to cause death without dying. Healing of the wounds caused by torture is a very long term, complex and a delicate process, sometimes without tangible results. Survivors often suffer in silence till the end of their lives. In order to make their further lives at least bearable, organizations like GCRT face a delicate task of helping them to restore their dignity and self-confidence, and to deal with the emotional and physical after-effects of torture. Effects of torture go far beyond individual consequences and have a destructive impact on the society at large. The government is responsible for holding the perpetrators accountable, ensuring that the survivors obtain justice and reparation and must allocate funds for psychosocial and medical rehabilitation of the survivors.

For more information:

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