

BACKGROUND _____

Survivors of Assad's torture regime demand justice – Criminal complaint in Germany

Testimonies of the complainants (extracts)

On 1 March 2017, together with seven women and men from Syria as well as Syrian lawyers Anwar al-Bunni (Syrian Center for Legal Researches & Studies) and Mazen Darwish (Syrian Center for Media and freedom of speech (SCM)), ECCHR submitted a criminal complaint concerning crimes committed by six high-level officials known by name and further unknown officials of the Syrian Military Intelligence Service to the German Federal Public Prosecutor. The criminal complaint refers to additional survivors of torture as witnesses.

Witness 5 (W5)

At the end of July 2014, **W5** was arrested at a checkpoint in Damascus for her participation in peaceful demonstrations. She was detained in branch 227 for one month. Unlike other prisoners, **W5** was placed in a single cell.

“The interrogations took place in the corridor. During the first ten days I was repeatedly dragged out of the cell and forced to stand on one leg in the corridor for half an hour. Meanwhile I could hear how other prisoners were being tortured. It was a common practice of ‘psychological torture’. I could hear it even from inside my cell”, said **W5**. The chief of the prison repeatedly ordered officers to drag the prisoners out of their cells to beat them with a green pipe or a hard plastic tube or to abuse them with a cable (,fira‘). On the 13th day of her detention, **W5** was beaten during an interrogation with the repeated use of a hand and a hard plastic tube. She remembers that it lasted for about ten hours.

W5 was allowed to use the bathroom three times a day. While there she had to stand and look at the ground. One day she heard a rattle and turned around. “There was a man lying, he was covered and the blanket was covered in blood. His face was yellow; one could only see his bones.” She asked the guard, who was accompanying her to the bathroom, to allow her to give him some water. As a result the guard punished her and prohibited her to use the bathroom for two days. “Furthermore they brought that man into my cell, and I was forced to watch how they were beating him.”

One day **W5** glanced into a large male-only cell. Later, the chief of the prison dragged her to that cell. “There were a hundred people crouching on the floor in

bright light. They were emaciated and shaven, their faces were yellow.” **W5** saw a fifteen-year old boy among the men and the oldest prisoner was approximately 80 years old.

After her mother paid one million Syrian pounds as a first payment for her release, **W5** was first transferred to branch 235 for one month and subsequently to Adra female prison for another month. Each time, her dossier was forwarded to the relevant prison. According to this dossier, she was accused of funding terrorists, supply of weapons, and participation in combat.

Finally, **W5** was brought before the Counter-Terrorism Court and acquitted, after the court usher was given a second bribery payment by her mother. However, she had to return to Adra prison because the Political Security Directorate was looking for her. She saw her mother for the last time there. **W5**’s cell in Adra prison was as big as an office desk, and it was completely dark inside. “No one interrogated me anymore. No one wanted anything from me anymore.” Fifteen days later she was finally released at the end of November 2014.

Witness 1 (W1)

W1 was arrested in April 2015 for the following reasons: he hosted an internal refugee in his house, distributed UN aid supplies and published a newspaper article that was critical of Assad. He was accompanying his son, who was going to Lebanon, when the border control arrested him. An employee of branch 235 (which, according to **W1**, is known as the ‘branch of death’) transferred him to Damascus.

„When we arrived in Damascus, I was brought to the first basement-level. There, all of my personal belongings were taken away. Then I was brought to another basement level, where I had to undress myself naked – and stay so until I was released”, said **W1**. “I had to stand in a row with other prisoners facing the wall. I lost track of time, but I assume that I had to stand there for almost 24 hours. Every time I leaned against the wall, the guards slammed me immediately. At some point I lost consciousness.” Later, he was brought into a cell. “I stayed in this cell throughout the whole period of my detention. The cell was four by eight meters in size. It was pitch-dark, one could not see anything. The stink was horrible. We were 91 men”.

Many prisoners were seriously ill, **W1** told ECCHR. “Many had skin diseases and abscesses, but had no energy to scare away the rats that abounded in the cell and gnawed on prisoners’ wounds.” There was nothing to drink or to eat. “There were

people dying around me. Their bodies stayed up to three days in our cell until the guards would bring them away.”

Beginning on the fourth day of his imprisonment, **W1** was tortured with electroshocks every day until he lost consciousness. In addition, the guards slammed the back of his head using a hard object, while exposing him to electric shocks. From the ninth day of the interrogations onward, he did not see anything, did not hear anything, and did not know anything. Thirteen days later, he was suddenly released. “I was so weak that two guards had to bring me out of the cell. Then, they gave me a glass of sugared water and literally threw me out of the prison.” He later discovered that a colleague of his wife used personal connections he had with the chief of the prison to assist with his release.

Witness 8 (W8)

W8 was originally detained in his home town in the south-west of Syria in November 2012, after meeting three activists in a friend’s flat and printing flyers about Assad’s violent oppression against the population. Later, when they left the house, the police were already waiting and transferred them to the branch of the local Military Intelligence Service. **W8** was detained there for 10 days, threatened with a life sentence and subsequently released.

In June 2013, he was arrested by a border official at the border with Lebanon, because his name was on the list of people wanted by branch 235 of the Military Intelligence Service. **W8** was detained in a small border prison overnight and transferred to branch 235 in Damascus the next morning.

While in detention, he was called 17/8 (Prisoner 17 from the cell no. 8), **W8** told ECCHR. “The cell was located in the basement of branch 235 and was approx. Seven by four meters in size. At first we were 86 prisoners, later 112. In the daytime, the prisoners were standing pressed together, in the nighttime we were sleeping on top of each other. There was always someone to suffer bruises or other injuries. Given the constant physical contact among the prisoners and the lack of air and light, skin diseases spread rapidly.”

W8 was tortured while being interrogated about his activities as an activist. “The guard kicked and hit me heavily, sometimes with a plastic tube. And he pushed my head against the wall.” He was blindfolded throughout the entire process. **W8** was forced to reveal the names of other activists, to match them with the numbers on his phone and to sign different papers without reading them beforehand.

Two months later, **W8** was brought before a Military Court. He explained to the judge that all of his confessions were obtained under torture. This explanation was made in vain: he was brought to a military prison in Khabun for the last night. „The conditions of this prison were even worse than those of branch 235. It was the hell”, said **W8**.

In September 2014, **W8** was given a type of permission that allowed him to leave Syria within 14 days. If he returned to Syria, he would be brought back to branch 235. After that, he left his homeland.

Witness 3 (W3)

W3 was arrested for the first time in Damascus in August 2011 and detained for two weeks. He was accused of carrying a weapon at a demonstration and passing on pictures taken at the demonstration to the TV-channel Al Jazeera.

In December 2011, he was arrested for the second time for participation in a demonstration in Damascus and detained in branch 215. During the arrest he was tied with cable straps, while his t-shirt was pulled over his head so that he could hardly see anything. “After we had arrived in prison, I and another 20 prisoners were forced to go upstairs to the sixth storey. The guards, who were standing along the stairs, hit us randomly. Some guards used wooden sticks, others used belt buckles or sawn-off plastic tubes. A few guards hit us with a stun gun. Whereby my glasses fell and were trampled down by another prisoner”, said **W3**. Then, the prisoners had to stand in the corridor facing the wall. “We were blindfolded and beaten by the guards with all kinds of objects on our backs. Almost two hours later, we were brought back to a cell. We had to undress ourselves naked there and were subsequently searched.”

While detained in branch 215, **W3** shared his 4 by 2 meter large cell with almost 30 other prisoners. He stayed there for six days and was interrogated twice. “They hit you with a cable and a kind of a pipe until you sign all of the accusations.”

After 28 days of detention, **W3** was transferred to a military prison in Khaboun. Two days later, he was released under the large-scale amnesty arranged by Bashar al-Assad.

Witness 7 (W7)

Since the beginning of the revolution in Syria, **W7** has been politically active, participated in demonstrations and hosted internal refugees. In December 2011, she

attended a meeting with eight (of 15) members of her “Coordination Team” in a café in Damascus. Syrian security forces stormed the café, arrested **W7** and other activists and brought them to branch 215. Once there, a prison guard forced her to undress herself and touched her in intimate places.

“After this humiliating body search, I was brought into a cell, which was 3,5 by 6,5 meters in size. Twenty people were temporarily hosted in this cell, including a 14 year old girl with her mother as well as two 17 year old young women, who were on their own”, said **W7**. She stayed in this cell for 33 days.

During the interrogations at branch 215, **W7** was insulted as a “whore” and her friend from the opposition movement was referred to as her pimp. She was accused of having had a „jihad-al-nikah” (intercourse with several men belonging to the Free Syrian Army). In addition, officers threatened to check whether or not she was a virgin, and to hang her naked in a hall full of men. Unlike her cell mates, **W7** was slapped in her face only once (during her last interrogation) and was never exposed to torture with electroshocks or other instruments that were commonly used in branch 215. For a long time she could not explain this privileged treatment. “After a while I knew the reason: the officer, who had been interrogating me throughout the whole period, proposed marriage to me.”

Thirty three days later, **W7** was brought to Adra prison, where she was detained for another month. Finally she was brought before a judge who found her guilty for her political activities. Her parents bribed a staff member of the court, and **W7** was subsequently released.

Status as of: 23 June 2017

European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR)

www.ecchr.eu