

Syrian student tells of torture ordeal in mass stadium detention

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A 25-year-old university student tells Amnesty International of the beatings and torture he and other detainees suffered while held in a sports stadium after he was seized with his 73-year-old father by security forces from their home in the coastal town of Baniyas on 8 May.

“Several soldiers knocked at the door, asked us to come with them for five minutes because the officer wanted to see our IDs. We went with them and there were many other men and boys being taken from their homes like us. They gathered us under Ras al-Naba’ Bridge, which is at the Ras al-Naba’ neighbourhood where armed clashes between the army and a few armed men had taken place last month [April].

“There were five Toyota buses, each accommodating 24 passengers, and a Mazda bus that accommodates 31 passengers, as well as military vehicles. I stayed away from my father because if they had hit my father in front of me, we would both have felt very bad.

“On the bus, three soldiers accompanying us started hitting men who were sitting in the front seats. I was sitting in the back. Then, the bus stopped in al-Qooz [an Alawite part of Baniyas] for a few minutes. We were led out of the bus and a soldier was passing by with scissors cutting off detainees’ locks of hair randomly. He cut off a lock of my hair at the back of my head for no reason.

“Then they took us to the sports stadium at the end of Corniche Street in Baniyas. When I stepped down off the bus, they blindfolded me and tied my hands in front of me with plastic wires. Some had their hands tied behind their back. Then they started hitting us. They made us all sit on our knees in the stadium’s open parking space. There were hundreds of us, so we were sitting close to each other.

“Soldiers wearing green camouflage uniforms and security people wearing green uniforms would walk around slapping us hard in the face, kicking us with their military boots all over our bodies, especially our backs, and beating us with coshes, batons and clubs.

“Then they would choose certain detainees randomly and drag them a bit away from the others so that they have enough space to beat them hard. One came to me as I was sitting on my knees, placed his shoe on my head and forced it down until my face touched the floor. He asked me: ‘Who is your master?’ I said: ‘Bashar al-Assad.’ He left me. The same thing happened to my friend, but the soldier banged my friend’s head on the floor with his shoe until he bled from his nose and mouth. He kept asking him, ‘Who is your God?’ and did not leave him until he said: ‘Bashar al-Assad.’

“If the blindfold slipped down, one of them would hit me and tie it up. When anyone of us asked for water, a soldier would throw some on our head and prevent us from drinking. If anyone asked to go to the toilet, they would say: ‘Pee in your pants.’ And some later told me that they peed in their trousers. You could see the big stains.

“I remember hearing a man pleading with them as he cried, saying that he had asthma, but they didn’t care.

"We all stayed like that, sitting on our knees, beaten badly and sworn at from around 2pm until 5.30pm. Then they ordered us to stand up and wait to register our names. As we were waiting, three soldiers came and asked me, a cousin, a neighbour and a friend to step out of the queue. One at a time, we were beaten with a long thick piece of wood that is usually used in construction. Two soldiers held me tight and the third struck me with all his strength with this piece of wood on the back of my legs. He hit me that way three times and I fell down. It was so terrible.

"Then after one hour of waiting to register our names, we were taken to the athletes' dormitory, which consists of a long corridor with large rooms. They packed each room with dozens of us. As I sat on my knees, my body became stuck to those sitting next to me. Then the security asked that we move to make passageways. Of course they needed these passageways so that they could pass between us and reach and hit all of us.

"I was on the edge of one of these 'passageways', which meant that I was easily reachable and was beaten badly. One slapped me so hard on my ear that I kept hearing buzzing for over two hours.

"They were particularly targeting those men with long beards [possibly perceived as Islamists opposed to the state] in their beatings. There was one man with a long beard who was a sailor, not an Islamist. They beat him so badly on his face, he bled a lot. My blindfold was set up a bit and when I tilted my head back, I could see.

"After several hours, they gave us a bit of water in the dormitory and allowed us to go to the toilet, only for peeing.

"Two incidents during detention made me feel very bad. One related to my cousin. He is also my friend and was among the detainees. His eyesight is so weak that he is almost blind. He told the security: 'I can't see. I have a card that shows I have disabilities.' They came to him and started beating him hard. I saw blood had run down from behind his ears on both sides.

"The other incident is related to a boy of possibly 15 years old or less. He had blisters on the back of one of his hands... I asked fellow detainees what had happened to his hand and they told me the blisters were caused by the security personnel burning him using a lighter.

"A doctor, who is around 32 and works at the Jam'iyat al-Birr wa al-Khadamat Hospital was beaten so badly that his hand was broken. The security said the hospital treated what they called 'terrorists'.

"My friend told me that he was sitting near a schoolteacher we know well, who is in his sixties. He was beaten badly despite his age. My friend told me that the schoolteacher addressed two of those who were beating him and reminded them that he had taught them in the past when they were younger. They just didn't care.

"When it was around 11pm, a senior officer came in and ordered the beatings to stop, and they did. When it was time to sleep, one detainee put his head on my thigh, another put his head on my stomach and I had to place my head on the belly of a detainee. It was hard to sleep that way. I just couldn't.

"The following day, we were not beaten up. Many of us were told that we were going to be released, but others remain held there until today. We had to pass by representatives of several

security agencies, give our names and if our name was not on any of the lists, we were allowed to leave.”