HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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Libya: June 1996 Killings at Abu Salim Prison

In the summer of 1996, stories began to filter out of Libya about a mass killing in Tripoli's Abu Salim prison. The details remained scarce, and the government initially denied that an incident had taken place. Libyan groups outside the country said up to 1,200 prisoners had died.

In 2001 and 2002, Libyan authorities began to inform some families with a relative in Abu Salim that their family-member had died, although they did not provide the body or details on the cause of death. In April 2004 Libyan leader Mu`ammar al-Qadhafi publicly acknowledged that killings had taken place in Abu Salim, and said that prisoners' families have the right to know what took place.

In May 2005 Human Rights Watch visited Abu Salim prison, run by the Internal Security Agency. Head of the agency Col. Tohamy Khaled said the government had opened an investigation into the 1996 incident, but did not provide information on the manner or timing of the investigation. Human Rights Watch subsequently asked the Libyan government for details on the investigation, but the government failed to reply.

Prisoners in Abu Salim prison interviewed by Human Rights Watch in May were unwilling to speak about the incident, apparently out of fear. The interviews focused on their individual cases, and all of them said that conditions in the prison had recently improved.

In June 2004 and again in June 2006, however, Human Rights Watch interviewed a former Abu Salim prisoner who claims to have witnessed the killings. Now living in the United States, where he has applied for asylum, Hussein al-Shafa'i said he spent 1988-2000 in Abu Salim on political charges, but was never brought to trial, and he worked in the prison kitchen in June 1996. Human Rights Watch could not verify his claims, but many details are consistent with a report from an "migr" Libyan group, based on another witness account.

According to al-Shafa'i, the incident began around 4:40 p.m. on June 28, when prisoners in Block 4 seized a guard named Omar who was bringing their food. Hundreds of prisoners from blocks 3, 5 and 6 escaped their cells. They were angry over restricted family visits and

poor living conditions, which had deteriorated after some prisoners escaped the previous year. Al-Shafa'i told Human Rights Watch:

> Five or seven minutes after it started, the guards on the roofs shot at the prisoners' shot at the prisoners who were in the open areas. There were 16 or 17 injured by bullets. The first to die was Mahmoud al-Mesiri. The prisoners took two guards hostage.

Half an hour later, al-Shafa'i said, two top security officials, Abdullah Sanussi, who is married to the sister of al-Qadhafi's wife, and Nasr al-Mabrouk arrived in a dark green Audi with a contingent of security personnel. Sanussi ordered the shooting to stop and told the prisoners to appoint four representatives for negotiations. The prisoners chose Muhammad al-Juweili, Muhammad Ghlayou, Miftah al-Dawadi, and Muhammad Bosadra.

According to al-Shafa'i, who said he observed and overheard the negotiations from the kitchen, the prisoners asked Sanussi for clean clothes, outside recreation, better medical care, family visits, and the right to have their cases heard before a court, because many of the prisoners were in prison without trial. Sanussi said he would address the physical conditions, but the prisoners had to return to their cells and release the two hostages. The prisoners agreed and released one guard named Atiya, but the guard Omar had died.

Security personnel took the bodies of those killed and sent the wounded for medical care. About 120 other sick prisoners boarded three buses, ostensibly to go to the hospital. According to al-Shafa'i, he saw the buses take the prisoners to the back of the prison.

Around 5:00 a.m. on June 29, security forces moved some of the prisoners between the civilian and military sections of the prison. By 9:00 a.m. they had forced hundreds of prisoners from blocks 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 into different courtyards. They moved the low security prisoners in block 2 to the military section and kept the prisoners in blocks 7 and 8, with individual cells, inside. Al-Shafa'i, who was behind the administration building with other kitchen workers at the time, told Human Rights Watch what happened next:

> At 11:00 a grenade was thrown into one of the courtyards. I did not see who threw it but I am sure it was a grenade. I heard an explosion and right after a constant shooting started from heavy weapons and kalashnikovs from the top of the roofs. The shooting continued from 11:00 until 1:35.

He continued:

> I could not see the dead prisoners who were shot, but I could see those who were shooting. They were a special unit and wearing khaki military hats. Six were using kalashnikovs. I saw them – at least six men – on the roofs of the cellblocks. They were wearing beige khaki uniforms with green bandanas, a turban-like thing. Around 2:00 p.m. the forces used pistols to "finish off those who were not dead," he said.

Abu Salim prison held between 1,600 and 1,700 prisoners at the time, and the security forces killed "around 1,200 people," al-Shafa'i said. He calculated this figure by counting the number of meals he prepared prior to and after the incident.

Cleanup began around 11:00 a.m. the next day, June 30, when security forces removed the bodies with wheelbarrows. They threw the bodies into trenches – 2 to 3 meters deep, one meter wide and about 100 meters long – that had been dug for a new wall. "I was asked by the prison guards to wash the watches that were taken from the bodies of the dead prisoners and were covered in blood," al-Shafai'i said. In 1999 security officials poured cement over the trench, he claimed, although he believed that they later had the bodies removed.

The only other description of the incident comes from a report by the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, an opposition political group based outside Libya. Drawing on the account of an anonymous former prisoner who witnessed the incident (not al-Shafa'i), the report largely corroborates al-Shafa'I's account.

The National Front report says that 120 sick and wounded prisoners boarded buses on June 28 to receive medical care but that many of them were executed, although it provides no details. The next day around 11:00, the report says, "hand grenades were thrown into the crowds of prisoners followed by continuous firing from different weapons like AK-47s, general purpose machine guns, crowd control machine guns. The raining of bullets continued for an entire hour."

The report does not mention trenches but says that refrigerator trucks from the Meat Transportation Company and the Marine Fisheries Company took bodies away. On June 30, a forklift loaded the last bodies into a container for trains. In total, 1,170 prisoners died, the report says, but it provides no names.

The Libyan government has denied that any crimes took place. In May 2005, Internal

Security Agency head Khaled told Human Rights Watch that prisoners had captured some guards during a meal and taken weapons from the prison cache. Prisoners and guards died as security personnel tried to restore order, he said, and the government had opened an investigation on order of the Secretary of Justice.

"When the committee concludes its work, because it has already started, we'll give a detailed report answering all questions," Khaled said.

According to Khaled, more than 400 prisoners escaped Abu Salim in four separate break-outs prior to and after the incident: in July 1995, December 1995, June 1996 and July 2001. Among the escapees were men who then fought with Islamist militant groups in Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq, he said.

A Libyan group based in Switzerland, Libyan Human Rights Solidarity, says that since 2001 the authorities have notified 112 families that a relative held in Abu Salim is dead, without providing the body or details on the cause of death. In addition, 238 families claim they have lost contact with a relative who was a prisoner in Abu Salim.

The organization expressed concern about one of the four prisoner negotiators from June 28, Muhammad Bosadra. According to the group, the authorities transferred Bosadra from Abu Salim to an unknown facility in summer 2005, and no one has heard from him since.

Human Rights Watch spoke with the brother of one former Abu Salim prisoner whom the authorities had informed of his brother's death. According to Farag al-Awani, now living in Switzerland, security agents arrested his brother Ibrahim al-Awani, 25 at the time, from the family home in al-Bayda in July 1995. The family never heard from Ibrahim again.

In 2002, members of Libya's Internal Security Agency told the family that Ibrahim had died in a Tripoli hospital due to sickness. A death certificate they provided, viewed by Human Rights Watch, said Ibrahim had died on July 3, 2001, but it gave no cause of death. Despite repeated requests, the authorities never returned the body, as required under Libyan law. It is unclear if Ibrahim al-Awani died in the June 1996 incident or at another time.

"We just want to know what happened and to have the body back," Farag al-Awani said.