

Syrian Defectors: Torture of children, rape by Syrian army 'routine'
By Roy Gutman, McClatchy Newspapers
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At the Domzin refugee camp near Dohuk, Iraq, workmen are now building a tent city to accommodate Syrian Kurdish soldiers who deserted the army and are fleeing the country. | Roy Gutman / MCT

DOMZIN, Iraq — In addition to shooting unarmed civilians, Syrian military personnel routinely have raped women and girls, tortured children and encouraged troops to loot the houses they storm, former foot soldiers say.

"What I have seen with my own eyes, it was indescribable," said Rolat Azad, 21, who said he'd served as a master sergeant in Idlib province in the northeast of Syria. There, he commanded 10 men who'd break into houses seeking to arrest men whose names they'd been given by the country's intelligence agencies. "They gave us orders: 'You are free to do what you like,' " he recalled.

Starting last July, he said, his unit arrested and tortured five to 10 people daily. "We had a torture room on our base," he said. "There was physical torture — beatings — and psychological tortures," said Azad, a Syrian Kurd who deserted and fled in March to the Kurdistan region of Iraq. "They also brought women and girls through. They put them in the closed room and called soldiers to rape them."

The women often were killed, he said.

Azad — as with other former soldiers here, the name is a pseudonym assumed to protect his family, still in Syria — was interviewed at a camp that Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government set up for Syrian army deserters. He recalled the torture of two young teenage boys. He said they'd been arrested either for shooting videos of the military or showing disrespect for the military and the regime, something that wasn't uncommon, even among children. "I once asked a small kid why he wasn't going to school," Azad said. "He said, 'We won't until this regime is gone.' "

One boy, about 13, was brought into the torture room and given electrical shocks, Azad said. Another, 14, was brought into the room in late February. His screams could be heard in the camp outside the town of Jisr al Shughour. "It was painful for all the soldiers," he said. Azad said he had no idea of the boy's fate. "They held him one or two days. Either they killed him or sent him to military security," he said.

Even worse, he said, was hearing the wailing and screaming of old men being tortured: "When they tortured old men, I couldn't stand it. I went outside. Others closed their eyes. I could not stay."

An independent U.N. commission of inquiry has described the Syrian government's offensive against civilians as possible "crimes against humanity." The commission, which reports to the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva, detailed arbitrary arrests, disappearances and torture, including the torture of children, in its latest report, issued in February, but it didn't detail the practice of rape. Commission officials said they had yet to talk with a rape victim.

Former soldiers described the anguish in attacking civilians and their homes. "It was a horrible thing," said Rodi, a former soldier who said he'd been based in Homs. "At the beginning, people in Homs were just going out and asking for their freedom and a change of government. The government started the shooting. After they killed a lot of people, people stood and continued protesting. We started shelling them."

He was assigned to a military construction unit but was ordered to the scenes of demonstrations, where troops would shoot at civilians.

"It was an ugly scene. We were at the top of a building and would shoot at civilians: children, women, men, anyone against the regime." He said the Syrian intelligence agencies stationed personnel to make sure they shot civilians. "They were watching anyone not shooting and taking down names," he said.

Several soldiers said Kurdish and Sunni Muslim troops tried wherever possible to fire over people's heads, but Alawites — members of the sect related to Shiite Islam that President Bashar Assad belongs to — boasted about how many demonstrators they'd killed.

"We had an order to shoot and kill," said Khaled Derecki, 20. "But some of those demonstrating were my friends, and we fired over their heads. "But the Alawites in my unit were very proud. They'd say: 'Today, we killed seven or eight.' "

Another soldier, who used the name Gula Rozava, said his commander had ordered his unit to shoot anyone who was demonstrating against the regime. "Maybe half of them were scared, and that's why they shot," he said.

The former soldiers were among more than a dozen whom McClatchy interviewed March 22-26 in three locations around Iraqi Kurdistan. All said they hadn't shot anyone directly.

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