

War by rape

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Syrian soldiers celebrate a victory over opposition insurgents. The regime is reportedly using rape as a tool of torture against prisoners. (AFP photo)

The Syrian regime is reportedly using rape as a tool of war against opposition forces. Human rights monitors have documented cases of sexual violence perpetrated by regime security forces against both men and women, however, first-person testimonies have been hard to come by. NOW sat down with a Syrian refugee in Lebanon who asked to be called Shero and who claims that he and his friend Meshaal were raped by regime forces.

The two young men are activist from the Monastery of Saint Moses the Abyssinian, a monastic community of Syriac Catholics north of Damascus. They worked closely with Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, the Roman Catholic priest who was recently expelled from Syria for criticizing the regime's violence.

Why were you and Meshaal detained?

Shero: We worked closely with father Paolo on humanitarian issues relating to the Syrian crisis. We also worked closely with caricaturist Ali Ferzat. Meshaal is Kurdish and I am half Kurdish, half Christian, and we both called for regime change. The regime was not happy with our activities.

But one need not be protesting to be detained these days; many are being detained because of personal vendettas and matters of settling scores. In return for money, security forces detain anyone. Meshaal is an activist, but security forces detained him following a quarrel he had with a pro-regime thug.

He was both tortured and sexually harassed, but he is not ready to speak about the latter. As for torture, he was severely beaten up; they tied him in the "chicken position" and to a tire. The tire had "God is not here and Mohammed is on vacation" written on it. They would mock him, saying, "Where is your *khoday* to help you now?" [*Khoday* means "God" in Kurdish.] They forced him to confess to crimes he had not committed. He was transferred to the Adra Prison without a court hearing. I later bribed the judge so he would release him on bail.

How does bribery work with the regime?

Shero: Just as the security forces are detaining Syrians for money, they are also releasing them for money. I bribed the attorney general to visit Meshaal in prison, then bribed the policeman to let me enter.

How were you detained?

Shero: The security forces set a trap for me. I was approached by civilians. They attacked me in daylight and no one came to help me. I screamed "Police!" and they answered, "We are the police, you idiot." They took me into the police station, and the officer there told them I had no charges on me, but they insisted that I had to be detained. The policeman told me that he could no longer help me.

When and how were you sexually harassed?

Shero: The same night, I was transferred to the crime department. At the entrance I saw a half-naked woman crying. As I was being interrogated, one officer came in and raped me, then another, then a third. The three raped me as the colonel and his assistant laughed. I was screaming, and no one came to my aid. I lost consciousness at a point, and then woke up to their kicking. One asked the other if I had died or not. The police there tried to harass me too. I managed to get some outside help, and so I was released and so was Meshaal.

Is rape a common tool used by regime forces?

Shero: Security forces very often resort to sexual violence to terrorize the people, even before the uprising. However, today the public is hearing more of it because of the media attention. There have been many cases of rape during the uprising, but people are afraid to speak up.

Why is sexual abuse seldom reported?

Shero: We live in a patriarchal society; it does not encourage us to talk about it because of fear and shame. Documenting such cases, especially against women, is extremely difficult. Societies are conservative and a family's honor is tied to the virtue of women. Two friends of mine, girls, were raped, but they would not consider speaking up. One of them is Christian and she was raped because she was a Christian protesting.

Why did you decide to speak up?

Shero: I want to speak up so the rest can find the courage to. I want the world to know that the revolution is not sectarian; Christians along with Muslims and Kurds are taking to the streets. The uprising is against the regime, and the regime is practicing violence against all those who defy it, whatever sect they belong to.

I believe that the regime is full of psychopaths. They have no cause and no values. They sexually harass to humiliate the protesters as a price for challenging the system and to frighten them against taking to the streets again. They want to break the people. It is a sign of a crumbling regime. But Meshaal and I defied them; we continued with our activism.

This interview has been condensed and edited for length



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