EUROPEAN CENTER FOR CONSTITUTIONAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS

ECCHR

BACKGROUND

Photographs and data from the "Caesar- File Support Group"

Evidence of systematic torture in detention facilities of the Syrian intelligence services and military police

Over several years the group of people supporting the Syrian military police defector known as "Caesar" has obtained thousands of photos of tortured and murdered detainees in Syrian government detention facilities and has smuggled the images out of Syria.

On 21 September 2017 the "Caesar-File Support Group" and the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) filed a criminal complaint with the German Federal Prosecutor in Karlsruhe against senior officials from the Syrian intelligence services and the military police concerning crimes against humanity and war crimes. A representative of the "Caesar-File Support Group" also provided the Federal Prosecutor with a set of high-resolution images and metadata.

The metadata can be used to verify the photographs and provide further information about them. This adds to the evidentiary value of the images and paves the way for further investigatory steps.

German authorities are already investigating the torture committed under Assad and in May 2017 heard evidence from torture survivors who, together with ECCHR, filed a criminal complaint with the German Federal Prosecutor in March 2017 against senior officials in the Syrian Military Intelligence Service.

The Caesar Photos

The "Caesar photos" represent unique proof of the Syrian government's machinery of torture and killing.

One aspect of the evidentiary value of the photos is that the injuries visible on the bodies of the corpses provide indications that (and how) detainees in Syrian military intelligence and military police facilities were tortured and killed. The high number of photos also demonstrates the bureaucratic procedures followed as well as the extent and the systematic nature of the torture and killing of detainees under Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The pictures were taken between May 2011 and August 2013. The "Caesar-File Support Group" says that more than half of the total 26,948 files show the bodies of detainees who died in Syrian government detention facilities.

The photographs were taken as part of the Syrian military police's internal procedures. According to "Caesar", new corpses were brought to the military hospitals almost every day. He says that forensic doctors, without carrying out any examination, would then arbitrarily note down a cause of death: either "cardiac failure" or "breathing difficulties".

Various sources indicate that the bodies in the photographs bore different numbers. One number was to indicate the institute or department where the deceased was last detained, another showed the detainee number assigned by the relevant intelligence services department. The forensic doctors would then assign one more number which would be written on a piece of cardboard and held up beside the body while the photograph was taken.

The vast majority of the photographs show the corpses of young men between the ages of 20 and 40. They are also said to include images of corpses of elderly people as well as of at least one woman and at least 100 children under the age of 18.

Metadata

Metadata attached to image files generally contains information on the camera model used to take the photograph. In many cases it also indicates the serial number of the device. This information is highly valuable for the verification of the photos. Metadata record often also reveals the "hash number" which can be used to verify that the images are genuine photos and not forgeries.

In many cases metadata also contains further information that goes beyond the content of the image itself. If the camera's GPS system was on at the time the picture was taken, the metadata can be used to help determine where the photo was taken. Metadata also includes information on the exact time the photo was taken and the time the picture was saved on another device. In cases where the photographer is registered as the camera's user, the metadata will also help identify the photographer.