

Morocco's chase for terrorists raises human rights concerns

Five years after Morocco's deadliest suicide bombings killed 45 people in Casablanca, the north African kingdom remains engaged in a relentless chase for Islamist terrorists.

Thousands of people have been detained, including dozens who have been abducted illegally by the secret service and taken to detention centres such as the ill-famed Temara near the capital Rabat, according to human rights groups.

The police activity makes Morocco look like a hotbed of terrorists, but the actual threat is not proportional to the number of arrests, terrorism expert Mohammed Darif said in an interview in Casablanca.

The professor attributes the extent of the crackdown to Morocco's attempts to please its ally, the US, and to a drive by some security chiefs to boost repressive security in order to stem the rise of a non-violent Islamist opposition and to block democratic reforms.

The Salafist bombers of Casablanca, who may have had a link with the Al Qaeda terrorist network, targeted Western and Jewish interests. The bombings May 16, 2003, killed 33 civilians and 12 bombers.

'Nobody would have thought that young Moroccans could blow themselves up' in the Muslim country known for its religious moderation, veteran journalist Khalid Jamai says at a sunny sidewalk cafeteria in Rabat.

'Now anything can happen' in terrorism and politics, he says pensively. 'We are in the unknown.'

The Casablanca attack was followed at spring 2007 by a string of minor suicide bombings, which killed several bombers and a police officer in the same port city.

Moroccans were also the main organisers of the Madrid train bombings, which claimed 191 lives in the Spanish capital in 2004.

One of the most loyal Western allies in the Arab world, Morocco had already launched a crackdown on Islamist extremists after the attacks of Sep 11, 2001 in the US.

More than 4,000 people have been detained. Around 1,300 of them have been tried and imprisoned, while the rest have been released.

Sixteen Islamist cells have been dismantled between 2003 and 2007, but some of them only recruited fighters for the Iraqi 'resistance' and would not have staged attacks in Morocco, according to Darif.

'There are lots of Islamists in Morocco,' but the overwhelming majority of them are not violent, the professor stresses.

In 2003, however, Morocco passed a tough anti-terrorism law allowing for suspects to be held for 12 days without charges, in a move criticised by human rights groups.

Dozens of people have been detained by the secret service DST, which does not have the authority to make arrests, and taken to detention centres such as the one in Temara, known for its torturers, according to Darif and other analysts.

Moroccans extradited by the US from its prison camp in Guantanamo, Cuba, are also taken to Temara for further questioning, according to several sources and media reports.

Temara reminds Moroccans of Tazmamart, a prison of even worse fame during the repressive 'years of lead' under 1961-1999 king Hassan II.

Hassan's son Mohammed VI has softened his father's iron-fist policies, but his initial attempts to increase the freedom of the press, of demonstrators and to improve the country's human rights record have slowed down.

Torture of detainees remains common in Morocco, analysts agree. 'We are aware of two people who were held on terrorism-related charges and died under torture,' says Khadija Ryadi, president of the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH).

Powerful people especially in the security sector are using terrorism partly as a pretext to stem democratic advances in order to protect their jobs and privileges, analysts said.

The anti-terrorism crackdown has also targeted non-violent Islamist movements, such as the non-parliamentary, semi-legal al-Adl w'al-Ihsane (Justice and Spirituality), which is regarded as the biggest de-facto oppositional force in the country.

Members of the movement are frequently detained on charges such as holding illegal meetings. Court cases against them usually end with acquittals or fines.

'The government is waging a psychological war against Islamists,' al-Adl w'al-Ihsane spokeswoman Nadia Yassine charges.

Ismail Alaoui, secretary-general of the leftist Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS) which belongs to the governing coalition, concedes that the anti-terrorist crackdown has curtailed freedoms, but feels that is difficult to avoid.

'We cannot act like angels or choir children' in the face of the terrorist threat, the former agriculture and education minister said.

Sinikka Tarvainen (© IANS / India eNews)