

Human Rights Groups Report Detention, Torture of Civilians in Ukraine

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Both Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian authorities have illegally detained and tortured civilians in the country's war-torn east, human rights groups reported Thursday.

Charities Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International issued a joint report revealing that both sides had executed "enforced disappearances." Detainees were "seized off the streets," denied medical attention, beaten and abused and "cut off from family and lawyers."

Ukrainian security services (SBU) allegedly operated an unofficial detention compound in Kharkiv, where as many as 16 people may remain detained without any official records. Local separatist in Donetsk and Luhansk operate "without any checks and balances," routinely "depriving" detainees "of their rights," and "leaving them helpless," the report said.

The 56-page report details 18 different cases, in which almost all detainees discussed being offered in “prisoner exchanges.” The groups expressed “serious concern” that such civilians are being used as “currency” between the two sides.

“In almost all the cases we investigated, captors told victims that they were being offered for prisoner exchanges. These stories gives us strong grounds to believe that both sides could be using civilians as “fodder” for potential exchanges. Such practices could constitute hostage taking, a war crime,” said Tanya Lokshina, a senior researcher for Europe and Central Asia at Human Rights Watch.

"We are both calling on Ukraine’s authorities and pro-Russian separatists to end enforced disappearances and arbitrary and incommunicado detention, and to put into effect zero-tolerance policies for torture and ill-treatment of detainees," she said.

The report also cited “lack of access for independent monitors,” and recommended that both sides “end and investigate” these enforced disappearances.

The conflict in eastern Ukraine has killed more than 9,000 civilians and combatants since April 2014.

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