A Report on Branch 215, Raid Brigade
Military Intelligence Division – Damascus

"A Conflict Between Death and Hope"

Violation Documentation Center in Syria
September 2013
# A Report on Branch 215, Raid Brigade Military Intelligence Division

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report Background</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report Methodology</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges and Difficulties</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Intelligence Division-Military Security</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branch 215, Raid Brigade</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testimonies and Statements of Former Detainees</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Testimony- A Detainee</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Testimony-A Detainee</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Testimony-A Detainee</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fourth Testimony: The Testimony of a Defected Sergeant</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Reasons behind death cases, a study by a specialized doctor</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass graves</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martyrs Cemetery in Najha</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahdaliyah Cemetery</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary and Results</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude and Indication</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

During the recent months of the Syrian revolution, the number of martyrs who have died in regime's detention centers- either as a result of the severe torture they are exposed to or due to the intentional health neglect induced by the regime's forces in those various secret detentions that are spread all over Syria- has increased dramatically and sharply. Different methods of killing, torture and ill-treatment are used in the various security bodies, usually in the first days of detention i.e. during the interrogation, which are the most difficult days in the life of the majority of detainees, as many of the eyewitnesses- who have been interviewed by VDC- confirmed that the most of the death cases happen almost exclusively in the first ten days of the detention life, and that whoever survives those days would be facing a slow death, usually due to chronic skin diseases or severe psychological pressure.

Report Background

This report comes within a series of reports issued by VDC about the secret detention centers in Syria, as the center tries, through these reports, to monitor and document all forms of ill-treatments the detainees are exposed to by the Syrian security forces. It tries, at the same time, to reach the people and bodies responsible for the overall abuses against the Syrian citizens in order to bring them justice first, and to ensure that those actions not to be repeated again in Future Syria second.

Report Methodology

VDC team has relied on many testimonies of former detainees to check out the actual alarming numbers of deaths cases that took place in Branch 215. This report has also depended on the testimony of one of the defected officers from the same branch, in addition to a consultation of a specialist doctor, to explain the actual reasons behind hundreds of deaths cases confirmed by all witnesses.
The team has taken those testimonies to a company that provided it satellite images, after all the witnesses confirmed that the martyrs who are tortured to death are buried in one of two potential locations, either in Najha, Damascus Suburbs or in Bahdaliyah near the first mentioned place. Human Rights Watch (HRW) had the primary role in providing VDC by the required Satellite images.

**Challenges and Difficulties**

When we are talking about the challenges faced, we need to take into consideration the issue or subject the report is about because challenges vary from case to case according to the complexities and the ins and outs of the issue. Therefore, setting a specific goal to this report, VDC decided to accomplish this goal in order to show to the public opinion the flagrant violations that are taking place in the cellars of the Syrian intelligence, particularly the Military Intelligence Division - Military Security.

In addition to showing the egregious violations and the various brutal torturing methods, investigating the geographic locations in which the martyrs are buried is also one of VDC's priorities in this report, especially after many testimonials agreed upon the geographical area where the mass grave is, in which bodies are buried collectively, in daylight sometimes. However, the main challenge was to get decisive evidence that the burials took place in that exact place, which have already contained many mass graves, especially that the regime has chosen places near the local cemeteries to bury those who had been tortured to death in its various security branches.
Military Intelligence Division – Military Security

The Syrian regime's intelligence bodies are divided into four main Divisions, namely:

- **Military Intelligence Division** "Military Security", nominally affiliated to the Ministry of Defense.
- **The Department of Air Force Intelligence** nominally affiliated to the Ministry of Defense.
- **Political Security Division** nominally affiliated to the Ministry of the Interior.
- The **General Intelligence Department**.

These sections are, in turn, divided into central branches in the capital, Damascus, in addition to regional branches in the governorates, and local branches in the cities and across the country. Each branch central, regional or local has one or more detention centers, that differ in number and size, according to the "importance" of the region.

* Practically, the Military Intelligence Division manages many different branches, especially in Damascus. VDC has managed through a dissident officer of the Department of State Security - Damascus – to identify most of its branches. **Our source, which refused to reveal his rank or any other details because he is inside Syrian:**

The Division is currently commanded by "Rafeeq Shehadeh" who was an officer responsible for the presidential palace's security and the commander of Branch 293 before he became the direct commander of the Division. The branches are as follows:

1 - **Branch 291** or as called the Administrative Branch or the Headquarter Branch is the throbbing heart of the intelligence body as it contains the files of all the employees within the Division and is located in The 6th May Street – AlTawajoh Al Syasi Street in Damascus.

2 - **Branch 293** known as Officers' Affairs Branch or Officers' Security or Officers' Interrogation Branch. It is in charge of supervising rank officers and student officers in the faculty or the academy faculty and it is the most influential because all officers in Syria are under its supervision regardless of his rank and when interrogated, the officer dislocates his stripes before getting in.
3 - Branch 294, the Security Force Branch, which is responsible for monitoring all army detachments and armed forces – except for the Air Force and Air Defense - and contains special files for soldiers privates in the army, and files for the camps and the military units and their status, readiness and loyalty. This branch exercises important supervision on the police and military units. It is a very important branch; it is also known as Information Branch and it currently directs the army's operations rooms of artillery shelling and warplanes. It is located near Adnan al – Maliki Square.

4 - Branch 235: Palestine Branch, the oldest and one of the most important branches of this intelligence body. It is a huge branch, almost the size of a whole intelligence body individually. It's specialized mainly in the Islamic movements; it is affiliated by a unit called "Commando Officers Unit" that has a separate building but it is a subsidiary of the mentioned branch and is concerned with the affairs of the Palestinian Liberation Army and armed Palestinian movements that exist on the Syrian territory.

5 - Branch 211 known as The Technical Branch or the Automatic Computer Branch or simply, the Computer Branch that employ competent agents highly specialized in IT and computer-related services. It's also in charge of monitoring online activity and intervening in cases of blocking or unblocking websites. It is located in Qaboun neighborhood in Damascus after the Police Academy on the main road. Furthermore, it is responsible for the wireless communications and providing technical support to the Branch 225.

6 - Branch 225 or the Communication Branch. It is specialized in internal and external communications which are made by phones, mobiles or fax. It can directly control all communications within Syria such as blocking specific numbers or cutting off calls or disabling SMS service for one of the numbers or even blocking a message before it is delivered, in addition to tapping calls. Its work in the field of internet is similar to that of Branch 211 with which it cooperates.

Note: This branch has been turned into a full Management following the outbreak of the revolution, and the officers were brought from various branches and departments (State Security - Military Security – Air Force Branch - Political Security) and their ID cards were replaced by others issued by the presidential palace that they are affiliated to the Communications Department.
7 - Branch 237: Wireless Waves Branch, specialized in scanning wireless radio waves and tracking and tapping wireless calls and overlap with them.

8 - Branch 215: Raid Brigade. It matches Branch 295 in the State Security. We will talk in detail about it through this report.

9 - Branch 216: Patrons Branch.

10 - Branch 220: Front Intelligence Branch, also known as Sa'sa Branch.

11 - Branch 227: Damascus Governorate Branch (also known as the Region Branch) it is a special branch since the central departments don't have a special branch in the capital; in the State Security, the Political Security and the Air Intelligence, there is no so-called Damascus Branch. There are only branches of the rest of the governorates because the Central Administration is higher and more important and located in the capital.

12 - Branch 248: Military Intelligence, Al Tawajoh Ahsyasi Street, The 6th May Street.

13 - Branch 261: Homs Branch.

14 - Branch 245: Deraa Branch.

15 - Branch 219: Hama Branch.

16 - Branch 222: Hasakah Branch.

17 - Branch 271: Idlib Branch.

18 - Branch 290: Aleppo Branch.

19 - Branch 243: Deir ez-Zor Branch.

20 - Branch 221: The Desert Branch (also called Palmyra Branch)

*     *     *     *     *     *
Testimonies and Statements of Former Detainees

VDC has started gathering testimonies, information and evidence about the reality of what is happening in the various security branches, as it released a report entitled "The hell of the Fourth Brigade Detention in Damascus" and another one on Branch 227 Damascus, the Region Branch, and several other reports on different security bodies. This report is one in a series of reports that will be issued successively by the center to go into the details of the real situation of detainees in different prisons, especially the Military Intelligence Brigade "Military Security" along with its different branches. We will focus in this report on Branch 215, Raid Brigade in Damascus, relying on the testimony of a number of detainees who have spent different prison terms there.

1)) The First Testimony

"I will set you up and send you to Damascus"

Marwan, Abu Anas *, did not know that these words will open his eyes to the thousands of tragedies that he had no idea they were taking place in Damascus, committed by those who are "supposed" to be the protecting the people.

Marwan, Abu Anas, a single commercial Institute student, who born in 1985 in Damascus, spent detention periods in many of the regime's intelligence detention centers, especially in Branch (215), or as it is called Raid Brigade. Marwan was returning from Lebanon on 06/05/2013 when he was surprised that his name was among the wanted at one of the border crossings as agents of the border security took him to a small prison inside the border checkpoint itself, where he met other eleven detainees of various charges. Hours later, he was transferred to Branch 248 on charges he did not know. Following is his testimony to Violation Documentation Center in Syria, Marwan says:

"When I was taken to Branch 248, which I knew later that I was in by the detainees themselves, and whose geographical location I could distinguish because I could see a little bit from under the cloth with which they covered my eyes. Upon arrival at the branch, they took me to a small office known as the Delivery Office, where one of assistants wrote down important information about me. He was a man with white hair, medium height who spoke the coastal dialect. He told me I was facing charges by a
military security detachment. Then one of the guards came (I think he was one of the Shabiha/militiamen because of his giant body, his face and his beard) and started beating me brutally using both hands, then he threw me on the floor and kicked me all over my body, especially on my face. After a while, he stopped beating me when he realized I was losing conscience.

They then took me to the main building - with another detainee at the age of 17 from one of the eastern governorates who had also been arrested at the Syrian-Lebanese border while he was leaving Syria. They took us about 30 stairs down, then they threw us in one of the cells which was 2 * 1.5 meters where there had been nine "soldiers" in their military uniforms and who had been charged with "attempting to defect", and who assured me that they had not had a shower for more than a month then as they had been prevented to. Three hours later, they called my name and transferred me to another 3*2.5 m that contains a small bathroom. We were about 36 people; most of us were either defected soldiers, or those who had been trying to defect, in addition to a small number of civilians, one of which was named Basem Hariri from Basr Harir, Daraa. He had been arrested on charges of "arms possession". While I was transferred from the cell, I noticed that a number of interrogators were conducting an investigation with two small children, the first was about nine years, and the second was about eleven years old. They were questioned about some of the armed men...

A satellite image showing the geographical location of Branch 248: Military Security

* All the personal information of the witness has been changed in consideration of his safety and that of his family. VDC has all the information and has reservations on publishing it now.
Not so long after, I was transferred the next day to Military police Branch in Qaboun within the coordinates (16°33'33" N 36°19'53"E) where the cells were full of detainees with various charges. I was put in a 2*5m cell with about 180 people. There were a lot of "hallucinations", a word that describes the case when a detainee starts to speak and act meaninglessly due to the extreme torture he has been exposed to, in addition to the very high temperature inside the cells. Among the worst cases I have witnessed was a man with an amputated feet, he was carried by a number of prisoners when the jailers called him. However, I could not find out the main reason behind the amputation of both legs, whether that happened inside the detention or not. All the detainees sweated heavily due to the lack of any ventilation holes. The smell was really bad, and the skin diseases were widely spread among all detainees.

After four consecutive days I spent at the headquarter of the Military Police in Qaboun, I was transferred, with another 17 detainees, to the Military Police in Sweida and then to one of the security branches, where I was "delivered" to an officers who has a huge body, a bald head, a black mustache, about 2m tall, more than 100 kg weight and
who spoke the coastal dialect. There, I saw a 20 year old girl from Daraa who had been arrested on charges of revolutionary activities. They put me in a dormitory" a relatively Wide cell" with other 50 detainees, mostly from Daraa. Two hours later, they called my name and took me to interrogation. There, officer " Abu Habib" told me that there is slander " a report" against me from an informer that I had some revolutionary activities. Definitely, I denied all the charges, but that did not help me as the interrogator started beating me by a wooden stick and he did not stop until it was broken as a result of strong strikes on my body. He also kicked me and slapped me, and that was coupled with a tremendous amount of insults and curses to me.

Four days later, they called me again and told me about the arrival of a new batch of charges; among of which was communicating with army soldiers to secure their dissidence, then I realized I was in a big trouble, especially after the officer said( in slang) "I will set you up and send you to Damascus". Minutes later, a number of guards beat me by a harsh plastic tube " a green tough hose used in pipelines, known by the detainees as Lakhdar Brahimi," as they beat me more than a hundred blow, mostly on the back, chest and abdomen ......

A patrol of the mentioned branch came four days later to take me- with another detainee named "M. A" and a defected soldier- to Damascus. We were supposed to be transferred to where I was at first, branch 248, Military security, yet because the branch could not accommodate any additional detainees, they transferred me to another branch, few minutes away from Branch 248 which I knew once I got in that it was Branch 215, or as it is called – Raid Brigade - which is also a subsidiary Division of the Military Intelligence or the Military Security, which is opposite the Ministry of Electricity, exactly in The 6th May Street.

((That is; next to the above mentioned branch. It seems that there is an intersection between the buildings, yet the underground cellars are separated))

Coordinates 33.507379N, 36.274010E
In Branch 215........

When we got to Branch 215, they took me to the interrogator (short, dark skin, about 95 Kg, speaks the Damascene dialect). He asked me about my charges, but he didn’t pay any attention to them. He asked one of the guards to take me. In our way, we passed through a big hole, and then we got down stairs. The moment they opened the door, I was surprised by the appearances of the detainees inside as they were waiting to go to bathroom, others were left in the corridor. They didn’t look like human; they were walking skeletons. Ulcerations were all over their bodies. Those who were thrown on the floor were swimming in a pool of blood and pus that ooze out of their bodies due to the lack of sanitizers and hygienic conditions.
When they transferred me to another cell, I got more familiar with the place and the number of cells; the interesting thing about that huge jail, which contains about 1800 detainees, is the absence of security guards, except for a small office for some officer in the corner. All the tasks in the dormitories are assigned to the 'Shawishia' or hard-laborers (old detainees, who have been detained for more than a year) that were not only responsible for hygiene and food, but also for moving the dead bodies of tortured detainees at the upper sixth floor.

One of the 'Shawishia' told me once that he was asked to bring a blanket and to go 'upstairs'. When he got there, he was surprised to find a detainee's body full of blood as he had been severely tortured and beaten with a hammer all over his body, especially on the head till he passed away.

I was transferred to Dormitory Khashab 1 (the wooden 1) which was headed by Abu Mahmoud AlAtrash. We were about 70 detainees in a (3.5*4 m) cell. The bad thing was that the 'Shawishia' have taken two thirds of the place. The rest of the place was for the new detainees who had to sleep in 'squatting' position. The 'Shawishia', however, can 'spread' their legs and sleep on their backs.

In this particular dormitory, I witnessed 7 death cases out of acute disease and high temperature. Most newly-arrested detainees were likely to have the 'detachment' (hallucination or detachment from surrounding, which was common in this branch) as they didn't tolerate the bad conditions of the branch. This 'detachment' symptom, usually, comes before the 'absolute' death as the detainee starts to lose his sense of the surrounding, then he loses his memory gradually. After that he starts to hallucinate which forecasts his death in the few coming hours.

In regard to the Sixth Floor or the interrogation room, the majority of the detainees revealed that they were exposed to brutal torture and beating, the worst of which was the 'Hanging' or hanging the detainee by his hands for several hours, in addition to electrifying, whipping and beating with truncheons all over the body.

Every day, we witnessed one or two death cases, most of them were among those who were brought from the detention centers in Homs, especially the Military Branch there.
Four days later, I was transferred to Dormitory 7; we were 70 detainees in a (4*4 m) cell. There I suffered a high temperature, my cellmates helped me reduce my body temperature by water and they took care of me. One of them was from Daraa; he had been detained for a year. He suffered severe chronic ulcerations too.

All the detainees in the dormitories (1800 detainees) use six bathrooms only. In some cases, a detainee might have to wait two days in the 'queue' to get to use the bathroom. The average age of the detainees is 20 to 30 years. According to old detainees, the higher number of death cases was in Ramadan 2012; as forty six detainees passed away. Most of the detainees from Homs were university students.

In the evening of 3 Jun 2012, one of my city citizens died after one year of detention following many detainees from my city that were killed in this branch, one of them was a student in the Faculty of Dentistry; he was subjected to 9 interrogation sessions and died due to wounds and torture.

There were two rooms near the bathrooms; the first one is called 'consolation' room where the dead bodies of tortured detainees are put. The second is an elongated room to put 'about-to-die' detainees who suffer chronic diseases. In the foyer, between the 'big hole' and the bathrooms, there were many detainees laid there waiting for death.

The witness has provided us with many names of dead detainees that he witnessed. VDC in Syria, however, has reservations on publishing these names until, firstly, verifying those names from some other source and secondly, for the consideration of their families' feelings.

The following picture shows the detention place and the number of dormitories, rooms, and detainees:
Dormitory - Hadid
Room Space: 5 x 4
Numbers: 90 - 100 Detainees

Patients - Dormitory
Room Space: 4 x 4
Numbers: 15 - 20 Detainees

Blankets Dormitory - Room
Room Space: 3 x 3
2 Solitary Cells
Bathrooms
Numbers: 10
Room Space: 5 x 5

Center Room
Room Space: 5 x 4
Numbers: 60 - 70 Detainees

Warrant officer third class Area
Room Space: 3 x 2

Dormitory - Khashab
Room Space: 4 x 4
Numbers: 60 - 80 Detainees

Bathrooms
Numbers: 5

Room Of the Deceased
Numbers: 15 - 20 Detainees

5 solitary cells

Hall: 850 Detainees

Saha: undefined number of detainees
M.F, One of the 'Shawishia' from Daraa, with some other detainees, was responsible for moving the dead bodies and sick detainees. He told me that he believed the number of those who had been killed under torture or out of diseases was more than 3,000 and that all their names were documented in the office of the officer responsible for the prison. At first, I didn't believe this number so I asked him again and again and he kept repeating the same answer.

When a detainee is released, he is asked to go to officer's office to sign some papers. Usually this happens at 11 pm. On 11 Jun 2013, I was one of those who were meant to have a new life; they summoned my name and asked me to go to the officer's office. Near the office, there were many detainees waiting to sign some papers. There were, also, nine dead bodies, one of which has the number '3234' on its forehead. I remembered, immediately, what one of the 'Shawishia' told me about the number of death cases.

When I finished the 'release' or 'transfer' forms, they asked me to go back to the dormitory and wait the arrival of the car at morning. In my way back, I started asking the old detainees about the number I saw on one of the bodies, they told me that this number includes those who were transferred to hospitals. I asked them 'where do they take the sick detainee?' they said that they have no idea and that none of the sick detainees came back. "We believe they are being buried alive" they said "all those who were transferred to hospitals, were nearly dead and all the bodies are numerated on their blankets. The majority of the number 3234 were dead already, the rest were nearly dead detainees.

"But where do they take them, when and how?" I asked.

They said "to Hospital 601 in Mazzeh, Damascus by a green van, just like the Russian-made ambulance that is used by the Syrian Army. To be taken, after that, to Najha in the countryside of Damascus, specifically, near the Martyrs Cemetery.

In the next morning, I was transferred, along with some other detainees, and a woman with her daughter to the Military Court in Damascus, then to the Military Police in Qaboun to be taken, after that, to the Judicial Palace in Damascus, where I appeared before the civil Judge, who issued my release.

End of Testimony
The following drawings show one of the torturing methods in Branch 215, which the detainees called 'Shabeh' (Hanging) as the detainee is hanged by his hands without touching the floor (50 cm above the floor in most cases) causing awful pain, ligament rupture and semi-permanent paralysis in the hands.

Picture (1) Feet 50 cm away from the floor

Picture (2) Feet touching the floor
2) Second Testimony

Young architect (A.B) nicknamed **Fajer Al Shami**, 23-years-old from Damascus. Date of arrest 22 Sep 2012 during a demonstration in Al Mowasat Square in the middle of Damascus as there were hundreds of demonstrators. The funny thing was when the security forces dispersed the demonstrators, they didn't arrest the 'required number' apparently, so they arrested 22 citizens happened to be in the area who were attending a memorial service for a deceased person (natural death) in the neighbourhood.

**Fajer says:**

After I got arrested, the security guards put me in a small security car and continued searching for more of those who participated in the demonstration, especially girls. During that time, they were beating me with backs of their guns.

They took us to the branch, only minutes away from Al Mowasat Square. I was surprised to find 42 detainees, 22 of which had nothing to do with the demonstration; they just happened to be in a memorial service in the area.

In the Branch 215, they put us in some big 'gym hall' on the first floor, where we waited for three hours. They took us down to some vault near the hall where they put me along with some 90 detainees in a 2.5*4 m cell called 'Khashab 1' (the wooden 1). It was very hot and moist due to the lack of ventilation. Each two new detainees had a space of 40*45 cm, in which they shifted rest hours (the first stands up, the second squats and vice versa). The old detainees, however, had three times more space than the two new ones.

We witnessed one or two 'hallucination cases' every day due to the psychological pressure, moist and hot weather; the detainee starts to say and do very strange and meaningless things. Going to bath room should be done in seconds and those who couldn't 'finish' in the bath room, in many cases 'did it' involuntarily in the cell.

I had been there for seven day when they called may name and took me to the 'interrogation room' on the seventh floor in the next building. They put me in the 'Dutch Chair' which is similar to the dentist's. They fixed me to it and started bending my back reversely till I confessed that I participated in the demonstration. The next day, they hanged me 50 cm above the floor for three hours which caused a severe pain in the
shoulders. After four days of beating and torturing, they took my fingerprint on 12 empty pages; the ones that were supposed to be filled with my statement.

I was tortured by an agent who speaks the coastal dialect (about 38 years old, 165cm tall, 80 kg weight, short hair, black moustache, light beard, big belly) in addition to two agents who speak the dialect of DeriEzzor Governorate.

After the interrogation, they took me to a new cell called Hadid 1 (the Iron 1) where I stayed there for 25 days. The cell was (3*5 m) and we were about 150 detainees. During those days, I witnessed more than 20 cases of hallucination and there were more than 30 detainees suffering from skin ulcerations all over their bodies especially the legs.

Most of them were so bad that the bones of the legs were showing. Most of the detainees suffered from skin rash as they were almost naked except for the 'underwear'. They also had long hair and long beards. When a detainee’s condition got very bad out of ulcerations and hallucination, he was left in the 'corridor'…

Every day about 20 detainees are thrown in the corridor to meet their 'destiny' or slow death. The cases range between the detainees who were about to die because of severe torture, hallucination or high temperature, and those who looked like skeletons out of acute ulcerations. They peed in the same place which is full of pus, and blood. They were about to faint with their eyes open, looking, maybe, for a passing detainee to deliver their suffering to the outside world.

Thirty five days later, on 27 Oct 2012 they transferred me to the 'Military Police' in Qaboun where I stayed for 3 days along with more than 90 detainees before transferring us to the Judicial Court where we were released pursuant to a presidential amnesty.

End of Testimony
The activist Abu Baker Al Zoubi, a teacher, 44 years old, from Daraa.

Abu Baker says:

On 5 Nov 2012, I was arrested in a military checkpoint in Daraa because of 'name similarity'. They handcuffed me and took me to Military Intelligence Branch in Swaida. I stayed there for a couple of days before they transferred me to Military Intelligence Branch in Daraa where I stayed for a month. On 7 Dec 2012, they took me with some other detainees to Branch 215 in Damascus. Old detainees there told us that we are in 'Raid Brigade' in 'Al Tawjih Al Siyasi' street.

I stayed in this branch for no more than 20 days. However, it was enough to give me an idea about what the detainees there are going through such as the severity of torture, the intentional medical delinquency, and the lack of food.

In regard to the torture, 'Hanging' is widely used in this branch, as they hang the detainee 50 cm above the floor and many agents beat him with plastic pipes (water pipelines) all over the body especially on the legs and the back.

Medical delinquency is, clearly, intentional, especially with detainees who had been charged of 'carrying a weapon'. No medical care is provided as skin diseases 'eat up' the bodies of hundreds of detainees who are fighting a slow death, in addition to chronic diarrhea patients; we have witnessed many death cases because of this disease only. Seven to nine detainees died every day because of torture and skin diseases.

Food meals were inadequate at all; each meal was half or quarter spoonful of jam with some bread at the morning. For lunch they provided a little pit of rice, sometimes with a lot of salt, and with no salt at all in others. They provided rice with a 'diesel' taste too. The place stinks as there were five toilets for 2000 detainees.
After 20 days, they transferred me to the Central Prison of Adraa where I stayed for six months in a row before they released me on 10 June 2013.

There is something serious in Branch 215, Raid Brigade; every day around midnight, they summon the names of the detainees of 'dangerous' charges, most of them from Daraa or Homs. We believed they are being released or transferred to some other branch. However, when we asked an officer about them, he said "they have 'dangerous' charges and they are being executed in someplace" (he didn't name it).

During my detention in Central Prison of Adraa, I met a former detainee in Branch 215, Raid Brigade, particularly in the 'big hall' that contained 1200 detainees, his name is abu Abdo (45 years old, from Homs, electrician). When I asked him "does the hall still have that big number of detainees?" he said "no, the chronic diarrhea has 'invaded' the branch and killed some 600 detainees last April; they were dying on large batches because of chronic diarrhea. Six detainees used the bathroom at the same time" he, himself, helped the guards to move the bodies of dead detainees.

End of Testimony

The Fourth Testimony: The Testimony of a Defected Sergeant

VDC has conducted a brief interview with Walid Samhani, a defected sergeant from the same Branch who, after he had defected, was promoted by the Free Army in Latakia, Al Akrad Mountain and joined one of the fighting battalions there.

The testimony was conducted on the phone, Walid says:
The 6th of May Street (or 'Al Tawjih Al Siyasi’ Street) contains many security branches especially those of Military Intelligence. If you entered the street from High Education Ministry side you find on the right firstly the 'Local Branch 227' then the 'Political Administration', then the Administration of 'Branch 217' a subsidiary of Military Intelligence. After that there is the 'Military Registrations Administration' and the 'Computer Branch' then Branch 248 which is, also, a subsidiary of Military Intelligence. Near this branch, there is 'Branch 215', Raid Brigade; it is located exactly on the opposite side of Al Fajer Electricity Company (owned by Makhlof Family, the president’s uncles). This branch consists of 7 floors; the sixth and the seventh floors are used for interrogation which practically means torturing and killing. During my service there, I have witnessed and heard many cases of killing under torture. The branch contains a detention center in the lower floors (cellar) and a 'Terrorism Combat' section too.

The branch is run by Brigadier General Hassan Daboul from the Syrian Coast. At the beginning of the revolution, this branch was responsible of cracking down demonstrations, particularly in Daraa. Till the middle of 2012, it was responsible of raiding houses especially at the break of dawn. At that time we were surprised of a resolution to transfer 201 agents including me to Keeping Order Brigade in Harasta due to 'trust issues' (unfortunately all of us were Sunni). I stayed there for two months before I seceded to join the brigades that are fighting the regime in Latakia countryside, Al Akrad Mountain.

End of Testimony

The Medical Reasons behind many death cases, a study by a specialized doctor:

In an interview with Dr. N.S.A (a graduate in Paris, specialized in General Medicine) who lived the revolution since the beginning, he stated:
Intentional medical delinquency, lack of drugs, sanitizers, food and water are some of the reasons behind the big number of death cases. Pain, alone, can cause death; in medical terms, a severe pain can cause a 'shock' which lead to sudden death especially when the torture is severe. Excessive panic triggers a lot of adrenaline in the blood which, also, can lead to sudden death.

- In regard to skin ulcerations and high temperature which lead to a death after a while, he adds:

  Ulcerations, particularly the chronic ones cause inflammations which, in turn, cause very high temperature which lead to losing consciousness (it has many stages) or hallucination which is accompanied with intense sweating. Such patient should be recompensed with a lot of fluids and serums as it dries up the fluids of the body. The dehydration affects the kidneys and can cause kidney failure and lack of ammonia in the body which lead to an absolute death. In some other cases, the germs and bacteria, caused by the inflammations, multiply in the blood causing acceleration in heart beats which lead to a sudden death.

All interviews were conducted by: **Bassam al–Ahmad**

Most witnesses' names were preserved for the safety of their families and theirs.
The question 'where do they bury all these bodies?' that always puzzled all documentation and rights centers, along with families of tortured martyrs in different branches like Branch 215, Raid Brigade, prompted the team that prepared this report to gather information about the place or places in which they bury all these bodies. Especially after many testimonies confirmed the possibility of two potential locations be the grave of thousands of martyrs.

VDC, in cooperation with Human Rights Watch, has prepared a detailed report about the suspected locations in which these martyrs might have been buried, especially after the testimonies of many detainees that were informed about the first location in Najha, Damascus Suburbs by some officers and guards. In addition to the testimony of the above mentioned defected officer Walid.

The second location is the 'Southern' cemetery near Al Husainia or as called Al Bahdaliyah Cemetery as it's located between Al Buhdulia and Al Husainia. A couple of months after the beginning of the revolution, it was turned into a closed military location; according to a testimony of one of the locals, many mass executions were carried out inside this cemetery.

Depending on satellite images and after gathering all information and testimonies to define the exact location, we came up with the following:

First: regarding...

1- Najha Cemetery, Damascus Suburbs
One of the toughest challenges we faced was that the regime forces have been burying these bodies in locations near the usual cemeteries or the cemeteries that the army uses usually. These facts made it impossible to confirm the presence of mass graves in these locations at first. However, after inspecting those places and the shape of 'holes' inside it and after many of the locals testified about the burying operations that required bulldozers and about the arrival of big refrigerated lorries (fruits and vegetables refrigerator trucks); all these testimonies made us nearly sure that there are mass cemeteries in this location. Moreover, on 9 Sep 2011 a mass cemetery contain 40 bodies was discovered according to testimonies of the above-mentioned detainees, local witnesses and activists in addition to the testimonies of the parents of some martyrs after buying some information about their deceased sons from the same Branch 215 saying that many 'burying operations' takes place in Najha. Satellites photos that were taken prove the following:
11– The changes in ‘Al Shuhada Cemetery/ Martyrs Cemetery’ in Najha between 8 Sep 2012 and 4 Feb 2013 showed by satellite images.

1-1- Picture 1 on the left, taken at the morning of 8 Sep 2012, in this cemetery, a 90 meters trench was dug in the period between 22 Aug 2011 and 5 Feb 2012. The trench was not covered in the following months.

2 – 1 - Picture 2 on the right, was taken in the morning 22 Sep 2012 there was some activity near the trench between 8 and 22 Sep and we can see some changes in addition to two white piles of white sand, stones, and lime (these substances are usually used to accelerate the dissolving of the buried bodies)

There is, also, a potential 'digging operation' about 25 meters away from the main trench.
3 – Picture 1 on the left, taken in the morning of 29 Nov 2012, a potential use of heavy equipment to fill the southern part of the trench was observed.

4- Picture 2 on the right, taken in the morning of 4 Feb 2013.

Digging a new 90 m trench, near the first one, was observed between 29 Nov 2012 and 4 Feb 2013.

In the morning of 4 Feb 2013, a potential presence of a bulldozer, a truck, and heavy equipment near these trenches which means there is a ceaseless digging in the cemetery during Feb 2012.
2- City’s Southern Cemetery (Al Bahdaliyah Cemetery), Damascus Suburbs:

Geographically, this cemetery is located a couple kilometres away from 'Al Shuhada Cemetery/ The Martyrs Cemetery' in Najha, near Al Husainia and Al Zeyabia. The investigation to prove that this cemetery is used for mass burying was relatively easier than the first one because of the following positive points:

1- The location is next to the local cemeteries (where civilians usually bury their dead).

2- The location is closed and secured by the regime forces which aroused the doubts of the locals that some 'terrible' things are taking place there especially after fencing the cemetery and putting watchtowers.

3- A number of testimonies, most of which are accurate, reveal that someday between the last days of Sep and the beginning of Oct 2012, particularly in the afternoon, two
refrigerated Lorries entered the cemetery and hundreds of bodies were buried there. That was observed from a far place before the arrival of the two lorries as the security forces closed all streets nearby with barriers and prevented anyone to approach.

Satellites pictures proved the following facts and results:

2) Changes in Bahdaliyah Cemetery between 8th Sep 2012 till 4th Feb 2013

1-2 a picture taken at the morning of 16 Jul 2012

Watchtowers surrounding the walls (less than 2m height) / pasture fields inside the cemetery walls,

Potential changes on the area thought to be new graves/ and the location of old graves since 2011.
2-2 A picture taken on the morning of 4 Aug 2012,

Between **16 Jul** and **4 Aug 2012** the potential digging area of new graves expanded about **600 m²**. The picture shows heavy equipment (4 meter trucks) in the morning of 4 Aug 2012.

At the same time a 'burying activity' was observed in the area.
2-3 A pictures taken in the morning of 28 Aug 2012,

Between 4 and 28 Aug 2012 the potential digging area of new graves expanded about 300 m².

Ceaseless digging and movements and piles of sands and stone (unlikely burying locations)
4-2- A picture taken at the morning of 8 Sep 2012,

Between 28 Aug and 8 Sep 2012 the potential digging area expanded to 700 m² which indicates a possible burying operation.

Between 28 Aug and 8 Sep 2012, there is a presumed expansion in the number of graves.
5-2- A picture taken at the morning of 22 Sep 2012,

Between 8 and 2 Sep 2012 there was no sign of digging.

Between the 8 and 22 Sep 2012 there is a presumed digging operation of 120 m².
6-2- A picture taken at the morning of 29 Nov 2012, a potential presence of 5 to 6 meter small digging machine near a potential new digging location.

Holes by presumed mortar missiles.

Between 22 Sep and 29 Nov 2012, the total digging location greatly increased (2100 m²)

Ceaseless digging and movements and piles of sands and stone (unlikely burying locations)
7-2- A picture taken in the morning of 4 Feb 2013,

Potential digging area (within 100 m²) between 29 Nov 2012 and 3 Feb 2013.
Summary and Results

1- Depending on witnesses' testimonies, Branch 215, Raid Brigade is responsible for thousands of extrajudicial killings for unknown reasons.

2- All testimonies affirmed, undoubtedly, that all detainees are exposed to systematic and severe torture practices, the strangest of which are carried out in Branch 215, which led to the death of hundreds of detainees under torture.

3- Nurture delinquency which does not meet the essential medical conditions causes many diseases like acute diarrhea which lead to hundreds of deaths.

4- Intentional medical delinquency, especially with detainees who were charged of 'carrying-weapons' or of the so called 'dangerous charges', led to hundreds of death cases especially with those who had chronic skin ulcerations or hallucinations.

5- According to two witnesses and a defected officer in Branch 215, tens of executions took place in this branch especially of detainees from Homs and Daraa.

6- According to all the testimonies that were conducted by VDC, the number of death cases out of torture and diseases has reached more than 3,000.

7- Dead and nearly dead detainees are all transferred to Hospital 601 in Mazzah or to Tishreen Military Hospital in Barza to be taken, after that, to mass graves in Najha or Al Bahdaliyah in the Countryside of Damascus.

8- Burying in these areas is carried out secretly under the supervision of the Syrian army and security forces.
Recommendation

1- VDC appeals to all international and judicial organizations to start an immediate inquiry to verify the alleged violation in Intelligence Division in general and Branch 215, Raid Brigade in particular.

2- International Community of the Red Cross is required to bid an immediate request to Syrian government to allow checking the conditions of the detainees in secret detention centers especially those which follow the Military Intelligence, led by Branch 215, Raid Brigade.

3- Investigating the horrible violations in Branch 215, is part of the jurisdiction of the Independent International Committee to Syria and thus the committee is demanded, by all means, to enrol these violation in the next prospective report.

4- National Coalition for Revolution and Opposition is required to seek, by all possible diplomatic means, an inquiry about the crimes committed by the hands of security forces especially the Military Intelligence.

5- Human Rights Council, as an international body, is required to prioritise the issue of the detainees by the Syria regime and to catalyze International Security Council to transfer the 'Syrian issue' to International Criminal Court.

Gratitude and Indication

VDC thanks everyone that participated in the hard work to accomplish this report especially the witnesses who jeopardize their own safety for the sake of delivering the suffering of detainees in security cellars. VDC also pays gratitude to International Human Rights Watch for providing the center with all the needed satellite pictures.
Using or copying these satellites pictures apart from the report is highly prohibited and if needed, any picture requires a written approval of the administration of VDC before publishing.

For Any comments or question, please contact us: editor@vdc-sy.info

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