**Human Rights Complaints Rise In Palestinian Territories, Group Says**

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Complaints of torture and other mistreatment rose by 50% last year in areas governed by the Palestinian Authority, according to a report by an independent commission.

The annual report by the Ramallah-based Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR), published Thursday, offers a hint at the kind of scrutiny the Palestinian Authority might face after joining United Nations agencies and treaties this year.

Though the report covers the period before the Palestinian Authority joined those treaties, including the four Geneva Conventions and the Convention Against Torture, commission officials said the international community would be watching the Palestinian Authority to make sure it abided by the terms of those agreements.

The Palestinian Authority submitted papers April 2 to join 15 international treaties as part of a drive to assert statehood, after the U.N. in 2012 upgraded the authority's status to non-member observer state. The treaty signatures scuttled talks with Israel.

"Palestine will be now obliged to present periodical reports on what measures it is taking to eliminate torture to show that it is committed to the Convention Against Torture," said Randa Siniora, executive director of ICHR.

The report notes "a remarkable increase in the number of complaints received on alleged cases of torture and violations involving the right to physical safety in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip."

It says that 497 allegations of torture and ill treatment were received by the commission in 2013, compared with 294 cases in 2012. Most of the cases - 347 - were in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian watchdog group, established by the president of the Palestinian Authority 20 years ago, said it had also registered a "noticeable increase" in arbitrary detentions in the West Bank and Gaza. It attributed the rise "to the political variables and the continuation of the internal political division" between the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority and Hamas, the Islamist movement that has ruled Gaza since 2007.

The commission said it had monitored "many attacks" on the personal freedoms of Palestinian journalists by security forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In a related development, 17 Palestinian and international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, released an open letter Thursday calling on Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to sign the Rome Statute in order to join the International Criminal Court.

The U.S., Israel and several European countries strongly oppose the Palestinians joining the ICC.

"Taking such steps could ensure access to international justice for victims of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed on Palestinian territories, and would send an important message that such crimes cannot be committed with impunity," says the letter, published on the Human Rights Watch website.

As ICC members, the Palestinians would be able to prosecute Israel over the killing of civilians, the building of settlements on Palestinian land and the demolition of homes and other acts by the Israeli army.

"Palestine’s accession in April to 20 international treaties and conventions was a significant and positive step, obliging the Palestinian government to respect, protect and fulfill human rights, and requiring Palestinian forces to abide by international rules on armed conflict," the rights groups said.