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Syria: Sednaya prison killings: independent investigation needed

Amnesty International is calling upon the Syrian authorities to establish immediately an independent body to investigate reports that at least 23 detainees were killed in disturbances which have been taking place since 5 July in Sednaya Military Prison, near Damascus.

Such an investigation must be thorough, prompt and impartial, as required under international law and standards. Its results must be made public and anyone reasonably suspected of involvement in the killings must be held accountable and brought to justice.

According to information received by Amnesty International, the disturbances began on the morning of 5 July when a contingent of Military Police officers undertook a search of prison cells, during which they threw copies of the Qur'an on the floor and stood on them, denigrating the religious beliefs of many prisoners. Nine unarmed Islamist detainees attempting to recover the copies of the Qur'an were said to have been shot dead by Military Police.

Reports indicate that, shortly after these killings, unarmed detainees managed to overpower the Military Police officers and captured a number of them, as well as the director of the prison, placing all of them in cells and taking their guns. The detainees are said to have demanded that their lives be spared and that measures be taken to improve conditions inside the prison. According to Syrian human rights organizations who have communicated with detainees inside Sednaya Military Prison, a further 14 detainees were killed during the struggle. The detainees are reported to have released the captives and to have handed over the guns. Security reinforcements had been brought in and continued to surround the prison on 7 July.

The Syrian authorities are obliged, under both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the revised Arab Charter on Human Rights, to both of which Syria is a state party, to protect the right to life of all individuals under their jurisdiction. Security forces and prison guards should in their work "minimize damage and injury, and respect and preserve human life", in accordance with the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. The Basic Principles provide that law enforcement

officials should apply non-violent means before resorting to the use of force and firearms, which can be used when strictly necessary. However, non-lethal incapacitating weapons should be sought to be used first in appropriate situations, in proportion to the danger presented. "Intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life." Amnesty International accordingly calls on the Syrian authorities to review regulations on opening fire by law enforcement officials to ensure that they conform with international law and standards.

Abuse against detainees, such as torture and ill-treatment during pre-trial detention, which itself may last several years, is widely reported in Syria's interrogation centres and prisons, yet rarely if ever investigated. Impunity for human rights violations in the country is a long-standing concern and underlines the need for any investigation to be independent of the government, the prison authorities and the security forces involved in the incidents.

While not seeking to prejudice the findings of any such enquiry, Amnesty International repeats its call to the Syrian authorities to abolish provisions that effectively grant immunity from prosecution to employees of the security forces for any offences they commit while carrying out their duties, such as Article 16 of Legislative Decree no. 14 of 1969.