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EGYPT: IN THE NAME OF " FIGHTING TERRORISM", INDEFINITE DETENTION AND TORTURE BECOME SYSTEMATIC

Human rights violations in Egypt are continuing -- and in many cases increasing -- in the name of "fighting terrorism", Amnesty International said in a report released today.

The report focuses on administrative detention without charge or trial, systematic torture of known or suspected members of armed Islamist opposition groups, the death penalty, as well as on killings and other abuses committed by armed opposition groups.

In the face of the continuing gross human rights violations, claims by the Egyptian Government that human rights are respected in Egypt remain hollow. In a recent report the United Nations Committee against Torture concluded that "torture is systematically practised by the security forces" and that "reported cases of torture are seen to be habitual, widespread and deliberate in at least a considerable part of the country".

Thousands of detainees are held without charge or trial, some for up to six years, under Article 3 of the emergency law, in violation of the few guarantees provided by this law. Scores were charged, tried and acquitted by state security courts or military courts, but instead of being released they were transferred to police stations, issued with new detention orders and taken back to prison.

Detainees are often denied access to their families and lawyers and are held virtually cut off from the outside world. In prisons like the High Security Prison in Tora and Istiqbal Tora Prison detainees have had no access to lawyers and families since December 1993 and September 1994, respectively.

Hassan al-Gharbawi Shahata, aged 34, is one of the longest serving administrative detainees in the country. Arrested on 11 January 1989, he was charged in connection with two cases relating to disturbances. Tried and acquitted in May 1990, he has remained in jail since then, despite many court orders to release him. He is now held in al-Wadi al-Gadid Prison and his health is reportedly deteriorating.

Amnesty International has over the years issued numerous reports documenting the systematic use of torture against political detainees in Egypt. Torture continues to take place in the State Security Investigations Department (SSI) headquarters in Lazoghly Square, SSI branches in the country, police stations and Firaq al-Amn (security brigades), where detainees are held incommunicado. In May 1996, the Committee against Torture noted with concern that " no investigation has ever been made and no legal action been brought against members of State Security Intelligence since the entry into force of the Convention for Egypt in 1987". The Committee urged the Egyptian Government to "make particular efforts to prevent its security forces from acting as a State within a State".

Amnesty International is also concerned about the continuing increased use of the death penalty. In the first four months of 1996 alone Amnesty International recorded 25 death sentences passed by criminal, military and (Emergency) State Security Courts in the country. During the same period four people who had been sentenced to death in previous years were executed. Most of the death sentences were passed after unfair trials, especially by military courts.

“Bringing to justice those who have committed recognizably criminal offences must be done within the rule of law and with full respect for human rights. It would seem, however, that the rule of law is sacrificed in Egypt,” Amnesty International said.

The organization is also gravely concerned by the growing number of civilians targeted by armed Islamist opposition groups. In the period from January to April 1996 at least 46 civilians were deliberately killed by members of armed opposition groups. Among the victims were members of the Coptic community, targeted because of their religion, and tourists.

“These groups should immediately stop killing and committing other abuses against civilians,” the organization said.

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