

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: MDE 28/004/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 055
11 March 2004

Embargo Date: 11 March 2004 00:01 GMT

Algeria: "Disappearances" must be on presidential election agenda

Six months on from the establishment of an ad hoc mechanism to look into the issue of "disappearances", Amnesty International urges all candidates in the presidential elections scheduled for 8 April to pledge their commitment to guaranteeing truth, justice and reparations for the thousands of families whose relatives "disappeared" in Algeria during the 1990s.

Amnesty International echoes the declaration made at the end of a seminar in Paris on 28 February 2004 organized by the *Collectif des familles de disparu(e)s en Algérie* (Collective of Families of the Disappeared in Algeria), which recalled the Algerian state's obligations under international law to establish the truth about "disappearances" cases, bring those responsible to justice and provide reparations for the victims.

The ad hoc mechanism on "disappearances" was established on the basis of a presidential decree dated 11 September 2003 and charged with serving as an interface between the Algerian authorities and families of the "disappeared".

Amnesty International is concerned that, among other things, the mechanism has only limited powers to gather information on "disappearances" cases and no mandate to identify those responsible for acts of "disappearance". In addition, its members do not include any representative of the families of the "disappeared". In view of these limitations, there is concern that it may not lead to the full, independent and impartial investigations necessary to provide families with verifiable information concerning the fate and whereabouts of their relatives, nor contribute to ending the impunity from which those responsible for "disappearances" continue to benefit.

There is a yawning gap between what can be achieved within the narrow mandate of the ad hoc mechanism and what must be done to ensure the rights to truth, justice and reparations of families of the "disappeared". Amnesty International calls on all presidential candidates to declare that they will guarantee this gap is bridged without delay.

Background

Since 1992, particularly between the years 1993 and 1998, thousands of men and women have "disappeared" in Algeria after being arrested by members of the security forces or abducted by state-armed militias. Amnesty International has compiled information on around 4,000 cases of "disappearance", but acknowledges that its records are far from comprehensive and that the true figure may therefore be significantly higher. The organization believes that, given the widespread and systematic nature of the

violations, they constitute crimes against humanity.

Since 1998 families of the "disappeared" have held regular peaceful demonstrations outside state institutions in various Algerian cities to protest at the authorities' failure to take their concerns seriously. They have also organized themselves into associations to coordinate their campaigning work, but to date have been unable to legally register them.

The issue of "disappearances" is just one aspect of the traumatic legacy of over a decade of violence, in which armed groups, the security forces and state-armed militias have been responsible for gross human rights abuses. For more information, see Amnesty International's latest report *Algeria: Steps towards change or empty promises?* (AI Index: MDE 28/005/2003), published on 16 September 2003, and the press release *Algeria: New "disappearances" mechanism must lead to full investigations* (AI Index: MDE 28/010/2003), published on 22 September 2003.