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Egyptian authorities must free protester convicted by military court

Amnesty International has called on the Egyptian authorities to release a man sentenced by a military court to five years in prison on Tuesday, apparently for exercising his right to peaceful protest.

Amr Abdallah Al Beheiry was convicted by the Supreme Military Court of assaulting a public official on duty and for breaking curfew.

He, his cousin and other protesters were reportedly beaten with sticks and then arrested as military police and the army used excessive force to disperse a protest outside the Parliament of Egypt in Cairo early in the morning of Saturday 26 February. Some protesters were also reportedly beaten with electric shock batons.

Amr Abdallah Al Beheiry was initially released by the military police but was rearrested shortly after, apparently because other protesters had filmed his injuries.

While in detention, Amr Abdallah Al Beheiry and his cousin were allegedly beaten and tortured by electric shocks.

His cousin and the other protesters were released later Saturday morning.

"The sentence against Amr Abdallah Al Beheiry should be dropped and he should be released if he was arrested simply for peacefully protesting. The Egyptian authorities cannot claim they are instigating reform while at the same time trying peaceful protesters before military courts," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

Amnesty International opposes the trial of civilians before military courts, which are known to fall short of standards of international standards on fair trials.

Amr Abdallah Al Beheiry will be able to appeal his sentence before the Supreme Military Court of Appeals.

The crackdown on protesters in Tahrir Square and outside the parliament who were calling for the dismissal of the current cabinet, carried on throughout Saturday morning.

More protesters were arrested and taken to military police premises behind the Egyptian museum in Tahrir Square, where Amnesty International documented the ill-treatment of previous detainees.

At around 8am on Saturday morning, a high ranking military police official reportedly apologised to the protesters for what happened and said the protesters would be released.

Later the Supreme Military Council said that while security forces meant to disperse the protest they did not intend to clash with the protesters.

"The excessive use of force against the protesters on Saturday cannot be justified. An apology cannot replace an investigation. The use of electric shock batons and the allegations of torture or other ill-treatment should be fully and impartially investigated and those responsible brought to justice," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

A large group of protesters currently remains in Tahrir Square, following recent widespread protest calling for political reform.

According to the Egyptian Front for the Defence of Egypt's Protesters, hundreds of civilians have been tried and sentenced by military courts. Most were charged with breaking curfew and posing a security threat.

Amnesty International has also received information on Maaty Ahmed Hamed Abu Arab who was arrested on 3 February in Tahrir Square while on his way to buy food. He was sentenced to five years in prison by a military court for breaking curfew and possession of a weapon. He, along with many others, is now held in Al Wadi Al Gadid prison, in the remote western desert.