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## **Algeria: Stop the denial, disclose the truth**

Ten days ahead of Algeria's presidential elections, Amnesty International called on the next president to address the legacy of human rights abuses of the 1990's internal conflict and respond to thousands of victims let down by the authorities.

"Algeria's next president should seize the opportunity of a new mandate to tackle the culture of impunity which has prevailed since the 1990s," said Philip Luther, Acting Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme. "How can there be genuine national reconciliation if the authorities are yet to establish the truth about past and ongoing crimes and justice for the victims?"

In a new report entitled *A Legacy of Impunity: A Threat to Algeria's Future* raises Amnesty International's concerns on the ongoing lack of investigations into human rights abuses of the past and present, and the impunity afforded to members of the security apparatus and armed groups.

According to the Algerian authorities, up to 200,000 people were killed during the 1990s conflict in Algeria when governmental forces fought armed groups following the cancellation of the 1992 legislative elections, which were set to be won by the Islamic Salvation Front.

Armed groups were responsible for the killing of civilians, abductions, torture and rape. Security forces and state-armed militias forcibly disappeared thousands of people, killed members of armed groups or those suspected to belong to them, and secretly detained and tortured others. The authorities deny that they were responsible for widespread human rights violations.

Amnesty measures instigated and promoted by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in power since 1999, have prevented victims and their families from obtaining truth, justice and reparation. Most crimes that took place during the conflict have never been investigated and the perpetrators have never been brought to justice.

"The blanket amnesties granted successively to armed groups and later to members of the security apparatus are an additional wound inflicted on the victims and their families," said Philip Luther. "Instead of granting impunity to perpetrators, thereby encouraging further abuses, the authorities should restore the dignity of victims by sending out a strong message that such crimes will no longer be tolerated."

The authorities are actively seeking to erase the memory of the internal conflict without dealing with its consequences on victims and the general human rights situation and shut down debate and criticism. Legislation adopted in 2006 muzzles voices critical of the authorities' conduct during the internal conflict by threatening them with prison terms of up to five years. Despite this, families of victims and activists have been vocal in demanding investigations into human rights abuses and justice for perpetrators sometimes at the risk of harassment. For example, Louisa Saker, who has not seen or heard from her husband since he was

arrested in 1994, was convicted in 2008 of participating in an unauthorized march because she demonstrated with families of the disappeared in the north-eastern city of Constantine. Nonetheless, she is determined to continue her struggle to uncover the truth about what happened to her husband.

“Families of victims of enforced disappearance are unable to mourn and achieve closure so long as their ordeal continues to be ignored,” said Philip Luther. “They are pressured into accepting death certificates and financial assistance whereas they are demanding truth and justice,” said Philip Luther.

Algerian authorities are now repeating the same argument of security threats and counter-terrorism that they used during the internal conflict to justify ongoing human rights violations. Security forces, and particularly the Department of Information and Security (Département du renseignement et de la sécurité, DRS), continue to detain terrorism suspects incommunicado in secret detention, at times for periods lasting weeks or even months, and subject them to torture and unfair trials in a climate of virtually total impunity.

Amnesty International reminds the Algerian authorities that killings of civilians by the al-Qaida Organization in the Islamic Maghreb, which it condemns without reserve, should not be used to justify violations in the context of counter-terrorism.

Amnesty International made a series of recommendations to the next president in its new report, including:

- Repeal laws that entrench impunity benefitting perpetrators of human rights abuses and ensure that no immunity from prosecution is granted to any person.
- Clarify the fate of victims of enforced disappearances and provide their families with an effective remedy; ensure that financial support to families of victims of enforced disappearances is not conditional upon the presentation of death certificates.
- Amend laws that curtail freedom of expression and threaten individuals critical of the conduct of security forces with imprisonment, and ensure that families and activists can demand truth, justice and reparation