

“Disappearances” of health professionals ALGERIA

Amnesty International is drawing attention to the cases of six health professionals who “disappeared” in Algeria in the period 1994-1997 and whose whereabouts have not been disclosed by the Algerian authorities. The organization is calling on the authorities to clarify their fate.

Background

In the conflict which began in Algeria in December 1992, arbitrary arrests, torture, “disappearances” and killings have become routine and up to 80,000 people have lost their lives.

The majority of the Algerian population is caught between armed groups which call themselves “Islamic groups” and security forces. Both sides have inflicted terrible suffering in a climate of impunity fostered by the total absence of any credible investigations by the Algerian authorities into such abuses -- and the unwillingness or incapacity of the international community to insist on or help to launch such investigations, despite repeated and urgent campaigning by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations.

While Amnesty International has information on hundreds of cases of “disappeared” people, the full figure in reality probably runs to thousands. The documented cases have been raised by Amnesty International with the Algerian authorities, with very little success to date, as the organization has either met with silence, hostility or obfuscation. However, a few “disappeared” people have recently been released from secret detention, which must give rise to hope for others.

This action focuses on six “disappeared” health professionals who disappeared in Algeria during the last four years.

The pattern of unlawful arrests

Arbitrary and unlawful arrests have been the norm rather than the exception over the last few years in Algeria. The circumstances tend to follow a repeated pattern whereby the arresting officers are hooded, armed and in special military uniforms (i.e. not from one of the regular official security forces), or in plain clothes and otherwise unidentifiable. Arrests are made in private homes at any time, during the day and in the middle of the night, and people are commonly removed in their pyjamas, or at their workplace, or in the street. Warrants are not produced, reasons are not given for the arrest, and no information is supplied to families about where those arrested are being taken and under what charges or for what reasons. Such raids and abductions of individuals in front of their families, friends, colleagues, neighbours are a daily reality and often the last time they will be seen by their loved ones or those who knew them.

Cases of medical professionals “disappeared” after unlawful arrest

Mustapha BENKARA

Head of surgery department at the Medea Hospital; born 14 July 1953; “disappeared” after arrest on 31 March 1994.

He was arrested whilst on duty at the hospital, in the presence of the hospital’s director and deputy director and another surgeon, by two or three men thought to be plain-clothes members of the police forces. For the first 10 days following his arrest, sympathetic personnel in the local *gendarmerie* (police force) assured his family that he was safe, although they weren’t allowed to see him. The family was then informed by the police that they did not know what had

happened to him after his period of *garde à vue*¹ with them.

Since that time, various members of Mustapha Benkara's family have made repeated and strenuous efforts at various levels, from local to national and ministerial, to try and establish his whereabouts or fate, but to no avail. In addition, both the *Syndicat des Médecins* and the *Conseil de l'Ordre des Médecins* assured his family that they would raise his case with the Minister of Health, but the family have heard nothing since. Different rumours have reached them about Mustapha Benkara's supposed detention in various towns, even about his supposed death. However, none of these rumours has ever been substantiated. Also around March 1994, several other medical members of staff of the Medea Hospital were arrested and are reported to have since "disappeared".

Mustapha Benkara had been previously arrested at the beginning of 1993 and accused of having given medical treatment, under duress, to an injured member of an armed group. These allegations were never substantiated, but he reportedly told police officers that it was his professional duty to provide medical care to those who needed it, whoever they might be. He was kept for a few hours at the *gendarmerie* and then released after they searched his home. He had been a candidate in the aborted 1991 elections for the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*, the party which had been in power from independence until 1989 and has been part of the government coalition since June 1997). His brother, who had been on a visit abroad at the time of Mustapha Benkara's arrest, was warned that he would also be arrested upon his return; he is now a refugee in Europe.

Chérif BELLAHRECHE

Head of the rheumatology department at the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire (University Hospital Centre) in Constantine; born in 1953; "disappeared" after arrest on 8 November 1994.

Garde à vue is incommunicado detention; up to 12 days are allowed under Algerian law for such detention. Even if this maximum period were to be respected by the detaining authorities, who in fact usually disregard it and keep people "disappeared" for months, it is unacceptably long according to international standards and is commonly the time when detainees are most at risk of ill-treatment, torture or extrajudicial execution.

According to the eye-witness report of a colleague, a doctor, he was arrested at work, in the middle of a consultation, by four men in civilian clothes who entered his surgery and stated only that they were from “la sécurité”. They whispered something into Dr Bellahreche’s ear and he told his colleague to carry on working. He asked the four men for time to change from his work clothes, then he was taken away by them in the back of his own car². His wife contacted all the *commissariats* (national police stations) for information, but in vain as they claimed not to have his name on their lists. In mid-February 1995, she heard from unconfirmed sources that he had been moved to Algiers. There has been no further news since then. He had been politically active in the past and was elected as an FIS (*Front Islamique du Salut*) member of parliament in the aborted elections of 1991.

Mabrouk MAADADI

Anaesthetist; lived and worked in Rass el Oued; “disappeared” after arrest in early 1995.

He was arrested at the hospital where he worked by policemen who first took him to his flat, which they searched, and then to a detention centre. His wife was allowed to take him food and clothing for a few days. After this, she was informed that he had been transferred but was unable to establish where he had been taken or what had happened to him. The authorities have still not provided his family with any information or explanation as to his whereabouts and legal status or fate.

Abdallah KHEZNADJI

Doctor and departmental head at the Héliopolis Hospital in Guelma; “disappeared” after arrest on 27 September 1995.

He was reportedly arrested by uniformed members of the security forces along with several other doctors at the Héliopolis Hospital; one of the doctors arrested with him was released a month later. Abdallah Kheznadji’s family has been unable to obtain any information from the authorities about his whereabouts and legal status or fate.

Yacine BOULASBAA

Qualified nurse, employed as paramedical officer at the Majan Hospital in Bab El Oued, Algiers; he was born on 3 August 1971, and “disappeared” after arrest on the night of 24-25 December 1995.

He is single and lived with his mother, father and younger brother.

He was arrested at home at about one o’clock in the morning by members of the security forces, who had been searching the block of flats he lived in, apparently looking for another, specific person. They reportedly left the area taking away Yacine Boulasbaa and several other young men from the neighbourhood. His family have been unable to obtain any information from the authorities about the reasons for his arrest, his whereabouts or fate.

Ali LAKHDAR-CHAOUICHE

Orthopaedic surgeon; worked at the Kouba Hospital in Algiers; born 2 March 1970; “disappeared” after arrest on 1 April 1997.

The use by the arresting forces of the victim’s own car is a frequent feature of such unlawful arrests.

He is single and was living with his parents in Baraka, Algiers. He is diabetic.

He was arrested at around two o'clock in the morning while he was on duty at the Kouba Hospital by members of the security forces. His family has been unable to obtain any information from the authorities about his whereabouts and legal status or fate, despite making persistent efforts to find these out with several different authorities. His face appeared around the world as newspapers in different countries featured a Reuters News Agency photograph of a demonstration held on 20 October 1997 in Algiers by families of "disappeared" men and women, in which one (unidentifiable) woman is holding up a photograph of Ali Lakhdar-Chaouche.

Conclusion

The six cases described here are not unique but rather illustrate the depth of the tragedy in Algeria. Amnesty International continues to urge the Algerian authorities to investigate all cases of human rights violations and to account for those whose "disappearance" is the result of the action of members of the security forces.