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ALGERIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR THOROUGH INVESTIGATIONS

Amnesty International has written to the Algerian President Liamine Zeroual submitting hundreds of cases of reported extrajudicial executions, torture and "disappearances" at the hands of the Algerian security forces and urging the President to ensure that these cases are investigated.

To date not a single case has been adequately investigated, in spite of assurances from the authorities that human rights violations by security forces will not be tolerated.

"Actions speak louder than words, and unless the authorities take urgent steps to carry out thorough, independent and impartial investigations into violations by the security forces, their stated commitment to respecting human rights will sound hollow. If the security forces are afforded impunity for the violations they commit, this will only encourage further violations." Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International condemns unreservedly killings and other crimes against civilians committed by armed groups who define themselves as "Islamic groups".

The human rights organization recognizes the right and the duty of the authorities to bring to justice those who commit crimes and acts of violence.

"These crimes and acts of violence by the armed groups, no matter how heinous, can never justify practices such as extrajudicial executions, torture and "disappearances" by the security forces", Amnesty International said.

The authorities have stated that law-enforcement officials have been disciplined for violations they have committed, but provided no information of such investigations and the measures taken against the perpetrators.

"Investigations and trials of security forces accused of abusing detainees should be made public and comply with international standards. It is states who ratify human rights standards and states who are bound by them. The same justice must apply to all those who commit crimes, no matter who they are," Amnesty International said.

A striking example of the failure to carry out adequate investigations is an incident in which at least 96 detainees were killed in Serkadji prison last February. More than five months after the incident, in which five guards were also killed, the only inquiry carried out by the official human rights body failed to investigate the causes and circumstances in which the detainees were killed.

The bodies of the victims were buried in nameless graves before anyone could see them. While the authorities have stated that the bodies were photographed to allow for post-burial identification, neither the families of the victims nor their lawyers have been allowed to see the

photographs. Amnesty International delegations who visited Algeria on two occasions in the last four months were not able to visit the prison or to see these photographs.

As the spiral of violence has continued to widen in Algeria, reports of extrajudicial executions by security forces have continued to increase. The authorities have stated that killings by security forces have taken place in self-defence during attacks by armed groups. Nevertheless, many of the victims are reportedly killed when not armed inside or outside their homes and in front of their families.

"Killings seem to be used as an alternative to arrest," the organization said.

Torture, which had been virtually eradicated between 1989 and 1991 appears to have become institutionalized. The most widespread method is the "chiffon", where dirty water mixed with chemicals is poured by force through a cloth stuffed in the detainee's mouth causing near-asphyxiation. Other methods include electric shocks, burnings with a blowtorch, insertion of bottles into the anus and placing the detainee's penis in a drawer and slamming it shut.

Judges and magistrates have consistently failed to investigate torture allegations and systematic breaches of detention and trial procedures.

In addition, as a result of the legal amendments introduced earlier this year to the Penal Code and the Code of Penal Procedure, the anti-terrorist decree of 1992, an emergency law, has been incorporated virtually in its entirety into permanent legislation. This is in direct contrast with the announcement by the Algerian authorities that the anti-terrorist decree would be repealed.

Amnesty International that the new legislation increases the scope of the death penalty and defines "terrorist" offences in vague and broad terms, and is therefore open to abuse.

Amnesty International urges the Algerian authorities to take urgent steps to put an immediate end to practices which violate both Algerian laws and Constitution, and international human rights treaties which it has ratified.

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