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EGYPT: GRAVE HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AMID POLITICAL VIOLENCE

The Egyptian government's crackdown on Islamic militants has led to a dramatic increase in human rights abuse, said Amnesty International in a report published today.

"We have seen a sharp rise in the number of people killed in disputed circumstances by government security forces," said the human rights organization. "They have reacted to increased killings of police officers and others by armed opposition groups with frightening brutality. In March 1993 alone, 29 alleged Islamic militants were killed by police - the security forces appear to have been given a licence to kill with impunity."

Last year saw an alarming number of incidents in which members of Islamic militant groups were killed allegedly while attempting to escape arrest. In August seven alleged members of a militant Islamic group - two of whom were only 17-years-old - were shot dead in an apartment. According to reports, the bodies were in positions that showed that some could not have offered armed resistance when they were killed. More recently, eight people were killed when police stormed a mosque in Aswan in early March 1993.

On top of the killings, there have also been mass arrests, torture, unfair political trials and death sentences. Thousands of people have been rounded up and detained without charge or trial under emergency legislation. Civilians have been tried unfairly and sentenced by military courts - 16 have already been sentenced to death. Now suspects as young as 15 can be tried by state security courts.

Others have been tortured. Ahmed Ibrahim 'Abd al-Galil was arrested in Alexandria last August. He says that electric shocks were applied to different parts of his body, including his genitals, and that he was beaten with a stick on his stomach and feet. Over three weeks later he was referred to a forensic medical doctor, who agreed that the physical scars he examined were consistent with the prisoner's account of torture.

Another man, Mahmoud Guhayni al-Sa'dawi, was reported to have died as a result of six days of torture in the headquarters of the State Security Intelligence in May 1992. Other detainees have died in custody since late 1992.

Some prisoners have been kept in custody for years without any charges being brought against them, with their short term detention orders being repeatedly renewed. Courts frequently order the release of political detainees held without charge or trial, finding no legal grounds on which to authorize an extended period of detention - but such orders are consistently flouted by security police who secretly remove "released" detainees to police stations or remote detention centres and issue a new detainee order.

"A number of detainees from Cairo were issued with new detention orders in December 1992, on the grounds of alleged involvement in terrorist attacks during the previous two months - even though they had been in detention at the time," said Amnesty International.

Hassan al-Gharbawi Shehata, a 31-year-old lawyer, was arrested in early 1989 and brought to trial the following year. Although he was acquitted in May 1990, he has apparently still not been freed, despite many court orders ordering his release. Even children aged 15 or 16 have been held for weeks incommunicado in secret detention.

Armed opposition groups, too, have been responsible for an increased number of deliberate and arbitrary killings since mid-1992. In June Farag Foda, a writer known for his secularist views and a vocal opponent of militant Islamic groups, was shot dead - al-Gama'a al-Islamiya (The Islamic Group) claimed responsibility. In addition to attacks on Egyptian Christians, three foreign tourists were killed in attacks in late 1992 and early 1993. Again, al-Gama'a al-Islamiya claimed responsibility for the killings, stating that attacks on tourist targets would continue until the government agreed to release members of the group in detention. Amnesty International always condemns the deliberate and arbitrary killing of civilians by opposition groups.

However, such abuses do not excuse the government's own harsh response. "Provocation from armed opposition groups is never a reason to step outside international law," said Amnesty International. "We are urging the government of Egypt to act now to halt the downward spiral of human rights in the country."

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