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Egypt: Police must be reined in to prevent further bloodshed

Evidence that the security forces have once again used unwarranted live fire and other excessive force underlines the crucial need for police reform, said Amnesty International after a weekend of violence left 90 dead.

Security forces used live rounds and tear gas to disperse supporters of deposed President Mohamed Morsi during demonstrations on Saturday, leaving 80 people dead. A further 10 people were killed by gunfire during clashes in Alexandria.

“The latest bloodshed should serve as a wake-up call to the Egyptian authorities over the urgency of police reform,” said Philip Luther, Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

The Interior Ministry has denied using live ammunition to disperse protests on 27 July. However, testimonies from injured protesters and eyewitnesses as well as medical and video evidence collected and examined by Amnesty International casts serious doubts on the Ministry of Interior’s version of events.

The Zeinhoum morgue in Cairo received 80 bodies on Saturday. Autopsies carried out on 63 of them by Sunday revealed that 51 had died as a result of bullet wounds. Eight sustained fatal shotgun pellet injuries and three people had suffered wounds by both types of ammunition. One man also died of fractures to the skull. Ammunition extracted from eight bodies included 9mm revolver bullets as well as rifle cartridges.

Doctors at the al-Husseini University hospital said 60 per cent of patients had been wounded from behind.

“Time and time again the Egyptian security forces have resorted to lethal force, with complete disregard for human life. Firearms should only be used by the security forces against the imminent threat of death or serious injury,” said Philip Luther.

Egypt’s Minister of Interior, Mohammed Ibrahim, said on Saturday that pro-Morsi protesters had used firearms and that security forces initially responded to protesters’ attempts to block traffic. There were no fatal casualties among security forces. Hours before the killings, Mohamed Ibrahim warned that the main pro-Morsi sit-in by Rabaa al-Adawiya would be dispersed.

Abdelrahman Koury, a 22-year-old protester who was shot in the shoulder on Saturday morning, told Amnesty International:

“The firing by security forces was non-stop... I survived the violence in front of the Republican Guard [where 51 Morsi supporters were killed on 8 July] but this was much worse. People kept falling around me.”

A 14-year-old boy from Fayoum was also shot in the back with shotgun pellets near the Unknown Soldier Mausoleum area. He said he had seen men dressed in black anti-riot gear shooting at demonstrators.

A photograph seen by Amnesty International also showed a man in police uniform aiming an AK-47 assault rifle at pro-Morsi protesters.

Amnesty International is calling on the Egyptian authorities to bring the legislation governing security forces into line with international human rights standards.

“The security forces cannot continue to operate in a climate of total impunity. The new government must prioritize long overdue reforms to the security sector. Its methods of policing protests must change to prevent further bloodshed.”

As an immediate step, the Egyptian authorities must issue clear instructions to security forces to refrain from the use of disproportionate force, the organization said.

As well as violations by the security forces against supporters of Morsi, there have also been reports that Morsi supporters have taken captive and tortured individuals associated with the anti-Morsi camp. Amnesty International fears for the safety of three men, described by Morsi supporters as “thugs” and captured by them on Saturday. Their whereabouts are unknown. Staff at the morgue in Cairo said that since the political violence began last month eight bodies have been brought in bearing signs of torture – all from the vicinity of pro-Morsi sit-ins. Some had had their nails pulled out. Two people were found dumped in a rubbish bin near the Rabaa al-Adawiya Square sit-in bearing signs of torture on Sunday. Only one survived.

Further information

Violence initially erupted on Nasr Road, near the junction with 6 of October Bridge, in Cairo at around 10.45pm on 26 July as the police and Central Security Forces (CSF), riot police, fired tear gas into protesters approaching the Bridge, pushing them back east along Nasr Road towards the main pro-Morsi sit-in at Rabaa al-Adawiya Square. The junction of Nasr Road with 6 of October Bridge is about 1.75 kilometres west of the square. Protesters told Amnesty International that, because of their increased numbers on Friday 26 July, they had spilled out of their regular protest area into Nasr Road and that some had marched towards 6 of October Bridge.

According to most accounts from protesters, four armoured vehicles were used, in addition to security force members on foot. Protesters’ testimonies as well as video evidence point to the involvement of men dressed in civilian clothing supporting security forces in the attack on pro-Morsi protesters. According to demonstrators, most of the men in civilian attire were throwing rocks. Some were also armed with blades.

Staff at nearby hospitals confirmed that the first patients from the night’s events arrived around 11pm, mostly suffering from the effects of tear gas. Some had sustained shotgun pellet wounds. The first casualties from live ammunition began arriving at about 1.30am. Protesters said that they had sought to prevent the advances of security forces and armoured vehicles towards the main sit-in area at Rabaa al-Adawiya Square by erecting barricades on Nasr Road built from pavement stones and throwing rocks at them. Video evidence points to the use of live fire by at least one pro-Morsi protester.

Fighting continued for hours, mainly around the area between the al-Azhar University on Nasr Road and the Mausoleum of the Unknown Soldier further down the same road. A number of protesters claimed that security forces and men in civilian clothing also used the al-Azhar University grounds as a base to shoot at them. The situation deteriorated further at about 2am with clashes continuing until about 9am. The heaviest number of casualties was reported between 6am and 7am, apparently when the number of pro-Morsi protesters increased and some of them attempted to advance on Nasr Road in the direction of 6 of October Bridge. Security forces responded with heavy gunfire.

Abdelrahman Khoury, 22, from Behira Governorate, who sustained a gunshot injury to the shoulder at

about 7.30 am, told Amnesty International:

“The firing by security forces was non-stop... I survived the violence in front of the Republican Guard [where at least 51 Morsi supporters were killed on 8 July], but this was much worse. People kept falling around me.”

His friend Omar Gamal Shalaan, a 21-year-old student, said he saw masked men wearing black, believed to be members of the Ministry of Interior’s Special Forces, participating in the fighting around this time.

A 14-year-old boy from Fayoum receiving medical treatment at a Cairo hospital told Amnesty International that he was approaching the mausoleum area at about 7am when he was shot in the back with shotgun pellets. He claimed he had seen men dressed in black wearing anti-riot gear – including padded vests and helmets – shooting at pro-Morsi protesters. He had been staying at the pro-Morsi sit-in with his relatives for the past few weeks.

Alaa Mostafa told Amnesty International that he last saw his brother Mohamed, a father of three, at about 6.30am by the Unknown Soldier Mausoleum. A few hours later, Alaa discovered Mohamed’s dead body at Nasr City’s Health Insurance hospital morgue.

When Amnesty International visited the hospital on the morning of 27 July, 21 bodies, which had arrived between 1.30am and 7.20am, were stretched out on mattresses on the floor at the hospital’s morgue. According to doctors present at the scene, all had died as a result of “gunshots”. A further 10 bodies were brought into the Al-Hussein University hospital, mostly between 6am and 7am, according to medical personnel, who claimed that 60 per cent of recorded wounds were sustained from behind.

Anas Ali Mohamed Ali said his brother younger Abdel Nasser, a 33-year-old worker and father of four from Behira, was killed by live fire to the chest at around 6am while far from the clashes. Anas Ali sustained shotgun pellet injuries to the arm and chest, while setting up a stone barricade, he claimed. Anas filed a police report accusing the Ministers of Interior and Defence of killing his brother.

Mohamed Taha, a medical school student volunteering with the Rabaa al-Adawiya field hospital, recounted to Amnesty International:

“At about 10.45pm we started receiving the first patients suffering from the effects of tear gas. At around midnight, a distraught woman came in claiming that live ammunition was being used. I decided to go closer to the site of the violence to help out. I was still wearing my white coat, and had my gloves on and basic first aid supplies with me. I got to our first barricade; there were about six of them in total. At that stage, we [pro-Morsi protesters] were standing just before the podium [across the street from the mausoleum]. About 50 metres away on Nasr Road, I could see riot police and thugs [men in civilian attire], and behind them [the riot police] armoured vehicles. There was really heavy use of tear gas, and we had to retreat, catch our breath and advance again. It was really dark, and hard to see...”

“Lots of people died between 6am and 7am, when we advanced further towards al-Azhar University. People were falling one after another. I carried at least 10 injured people towards the back; they were then loaded onto ambulances, motorcycles or cars and taken to hospitals. I was myself shot in the shoulder at about 7.30am.”

A number of protesters claimed that armed forces were guarding the podium facing the mausoleum, but did not intervene. A few protesters said that soldiers fired warning shots into the air when riot police approached the mausoleum.

A sample group of those killed suggests that most casualties are from villages from governorates from outside of Cairo including Behira, Alexandria, Assiut and Fayoum.

A number of pro-Morsi protesters told Amnesty International that during the violence on 27 July on Nasr Road, they captured at least three “thugs”, referring to men in civilian attire who were supporting the

security forces, and handed them over to the Rabaa al-Adawiya field hospital. Amnesty International is concerned about their safety amid reports and first-hand testimonies of the use of torture by Morsi supporters against their alleged opponents.

Morgue staff in Cairo told Amnesty International that, since mass rival rallies began in late June, eight bodies have been brought in bearing signs of torture; some had had their nails pulled out. All victims were brought in from areas near large pro-Morsi sit-ins. Three of the victims were found in the vicinity of Rabaa al-Adawiya Square and two at the Oumran Garden, near the pro-Morsi sit-in outside Cairo University. A further three bodies, with similar signs of torture, were found dumped in a rubbish bin in Giza.

Testimonies of survivors indicate that some Morsi supporters have captured and tortured individuals they suspect of belonging to the other camp. Local residents told Amnesty International that on the morning of 28 July they found two people bearing signs of torture dumped by a rubbish bin near Rabaa al-Adawiya Square. One of the victims, whose legs and arms were broken and who had swollen eyes and contusions on his chest, died shortly after. He had no identification on him. The other victim was blindfolded, had what appeared to be stab wounds on the neck and head and was bleeding profusely, according to local residents who found him.