

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Egypt: Protection of witnesses and suspension of police officers needed

Amnesty International today urged the Egyptian authorities to immediately put in place measures to protect witnesses of the death of Khaled Mohammed Said and suspend the officers believed to be responsible, pending a comprehensive investigation into their conduct.

Such action is fundamental if the authorities are serious about establishing truth and justice as failure to do so would risk undermining the investigation opened by the Public Prosecutor.

Amnesty International welcomes the news that the Public Prosecutor ordered on Monday 14 June 2010 that a new medical examination be carried out under the supervision of three forensic doctors in order to establish the causes of the death of Khaled Mohammed Said.

It is essential for such an investigation to be independent and impartial, and that it abides fully with the UN Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions. While carrying out investigation, it is incumbent on the Egyptian authorities to protect the victim's family and any other possible witnesses from violence, threat of violence and any other form of intimidation and reprisal.

National and international human rights organizations have documented numerous cases in Egypt where pressure exerted on the victim's family in case of abuses by the security forces has often led to the perversion of justice as relatives and witnesses are left without protection.

The lack of protection has been exacerbated by the fact that security officers who are accused of committing abuses are not suspended pending investigation but continue to carry out their duties. As such, they are left free to intimidate the victim's relatives into silence or to force them into withdraw their complaints.

The fact that the two officers believed to have killed Khaled Mohammed Said have not been so far suspended is alarming and sends a chilling message that the security forces in Egypt are effectively above the law and do not expect to be held accountable for their actions.

The fact that these two police officers remain on duty also contradicts the Egyptian authorities' ostensible commitment to the fight against abuses by its security forces, as allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in Egypt's police stations and detention centres remain rife. It also runs counter to international human rights law and standards, which provide that state officials who commit gross human rights violations, including torture, should be dismissed from their positions. Pending the results of the investigation, the two police officers and any other official who might have been implicated should be suspended.

However, instead of ensuring that any officials responsible for committing, ordering or failing reasonably to prevent any human rights violations is brought to justice, the Ministry of Interior in a statement on 12 June seems to have opted for covering up for the abuses of its security forces. The statement claimed that the death of Khaled Mohammed Said was the result of asphyxiation, according to the preliminary forensic report, due to the victim's having swallowed a bag of drugs when approached by the security forces. It however did not give any explanation regarding the shocking pictures of Khaled Mohammed Said's body, whose face is almost unrecognizable from the beating he received.

In its statement, the Ministry also condemned the posting of the picture of Khaled Mohammed Said as an attempt to tarnish the image of the Egyptian security forces.

A similar statement was made by the Ministry when videos of the torture and rape of bus driver Emad el Kabir by two police officers while in custody in Giza in 2006 were posted on the internet, causing an international outcry. The rape was filmed by one of the two police officers, who told Emad al-Kabir he would circulate the video in the victim's neighbourhood to publicly humiliate him and intimidate others. One of the two police officers convicted for his torture was reinstated into his post after serving three quarters of his three-year prison sentence.

Instead of addressing the routine abuses taking place in Egypt, the authorities have turned against peaceful demonstrators demanding justice for Khaled Mohamed Said.

Around 200 activists gathered in Lazoghly Square, Cairo, on Sunday to call for justice for Khaled Mohammed Said. More than 40 people were seized by security officers while they were peacefully protesting. They said they were then bundled into police trucks, beaten and dumped outside central Cairo.

Five others who were arrested after similar protests in Alexandria and were later released are now facing criminal charges.

Amnesty International believes that what is tarnishing the image of Egypt is not the posting of pictures or peaceful demonstrators asking for accountability, but the denial of abuses by the Ministry of Interior.

Background

Khaled Mohammed Said, a 28-year-old man, was severely beaten by two plain-clothes police officers in an internet cafe on 6 June. He was reportedly dragged out of the café and the beating continued until he died.

According to a lawyer from El-Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, Khaled Mohammed Said's relatives were informed of his death, but were prevented from seeing his body immediately. The police took them to Sidi Gaber police station, where they were told that Khaled Mohammed Said had swallowed a bag of narcotics when the police had approached him, and had died from an overdose.

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