

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

04 October 2010

AI Index: MDE 12/031/2010

Egypt: Threat of forcible eviction of Greater Cairo's "shack" dwellers

Today, marking World Habitat Day, Amnesty International, the Egyptian Center for Housing Rights and the Habitat International Coalition – Housing and Land Rights Network announced that they sent a joint letter last week to Egypt's Prime Minister to urge the government to prevent the forcible eviction of residents of informal settlements in Greater Cairo that have been officially designated as "shack areas".

The organizations made this call as residents of 33 "shack areas" in Cairo and nearby Giza face possible forced eviction from their homes and relocation to 6 October City and 15 May City, respectively outside Giza and Cairo, where some 35,700 housing units should be allocated for them. In May 2010, Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif announced that the areas in which they now live are to be cleared for redevelopment as part of the 2050 Strategic Vision for Greater Cairo. The residents have not been adequately consulted about the decision to forcibly evict and relocate them.

The three organizations, all of whom campaign against forced evictions and for realization of the right to adequate housing, told the Prime Minister that the Egyptian authorities' plan appears to lack adequate safeguards against forced evictions in that they do not allow for full and adequate prior consultation with the affected residents regarding possible alternatives to their eviction and over resettlement conditions.

In particular, if an eviction plan is agreed, the residents must be informed of the intended date of their eviction and the conditions for relocation sufficiently in advance to allow them to challenge these decisions before an independent court. Moreover, Egyptian police and security forces must ensure that excessive force is not employed in carrying out evictions and the authorities must take steps to prevent anyone being rendered homeless as a result of eviction.

One of the informal settlements under threat is Ramlet Bulaq (Maspiro). This is an area of central Cairo located in the shadow of business towers and official buildings on the Nile. The Cairo 2050 plan for Cairo's "development" considers this to be an area suitable only for tourism and the location of business and administrative buildings with a view of the Nile and stretches of gardens. It sees no future there for the current residents, families who have been living there for generations, but who the authorities plan to remove from the area and relocate them in new towns miles away in the outskirts of Greater Cairo.

Ezbet Abu Qarn, in old Cairo, is another informal settlement where many residents work as solid waste recyclers. It too has been designated as a "shack area" and, under the 2050 plan, its residents will also be required to leave the old heart of Cairo where the oldest mosques and churches in the mutli-religious compound are located. The area's residents want to improve their housing conditions, not move away, but fear that they face inevitable forced eviction.

Generally, residents of informal settlements prefer to remain in their current locations, closer to the city, and fear that their resettlement to new urban cities far from their work places will severely affect their ability to maintain their present livelihoods and will severely disrupt or destroy their existing social networks.

Amnesty International, the Egyptian Center for Housing Rights and Habitat International Coalition – Housing and Land Rights Network consider that the resident of all informal settlements have a right to participate actively in the development and implementation of plans that so directly affect their lives. Active participation is the cornerstone for reaching fair and just solutions that realize the affected people's right to adequate housing.

According to the Informal Settlements Development Facility (ISDF), a body established under the authority of the Egyptian Prime Minister's Cabinet, the residents of the 33 "shack areas" who are to be relocated will be provided with socio-economic support programmes, such as training to find work (especially for youth), health services for women, illiteracy classes for heads of households, and identity cards. This represents an important step forward, but it may not be sufficient to address adequately all of their needs, and this needs to be discussed in advance as part of the consultation process.

Since the fatal rockslide at Al-Duwayqa in September 2008, which killed at least 119 people in Manshiyet Nasser informal settlement, east of Cairo, the ISDF has classified Egypt's informal settlements according to their assessment of the degree of danger facing local residents whether from rockslides or other threats to their lives and health. In Cairo, 16 areas were identified as posing an imminent threat of death to residents; these are mostly other areas of Manshiyet Nasser and in Old Cairo's informal settlements. The ISDF considers that "shack areas" are a second type of informal settlement that is "unsafe," because they were built with makeshift materials and are considered, therefore, to provide inadequate shelter for their occupants.

Forced evictions that have been carried out by the Egyptian authorities up to now, as the three organizations have documented, have breached Egypt's obligation under international law, notably the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' General Comment No. 7 of 1997.

In the past two years, the Egyptian authorities have carried out evictions without consulting residents about the conditions of resettlement and without adequate prior notice. Many families have been made homeless following the demolition of their homes, as a result of imprecise enumerations that lack working criteria and processes. Some have been relocated in alternative housing only after months of homelessness. Women have faced discrimination in the allocation of flats, as in the absence of their spouse they are often not seen as representing a separate household from their parents.

Since the fatal rockslide of 2008, the Cairo Governorate says it has relocated about 9,100 families from Manshiyet Nasser to alternative housing in nearby New al-Duwayqa and to al-Nahda City, north of Cairo. About 2,000 families from Establ Antar and Ezbet Khayrallah informal settlements, in Old Cairo, were relocated into alternative housing in 6 October City. These were not provided with documentation to guarantee them security of tenure and protection from future evictions.

Amnesty International, the Egyptian Center for Housing Rights and the Habitat International Coalition – Housing and Land Rights Network are urging the Egyptian government to apply existing human rights standards of adequate housing as a means to avoid causing further hardship for Cairo's "shack" dwellers and enable the ultimate success of plans and projects for social and economic development.