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Egypt: Amnesty International calls for President to allow observers at key military trial

Amnesty International announced today that it has written to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, urging him to ensure that independent observers are permitted access to the trial of 40 members of the Muslim Brotherhood, scheduled to resume before the Supreme Military Court in Cairo on Sunday.

The organization made this call following two earlier trial hearings when legal observers sent by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations were barred from entering the court.

"We look to President Mubarak, as Egypt's highest authority, to open the doors to this important trial," said Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan. "He should clear the way for it to receive the scrutiny it deserves."

Amnesty International's trial observer, Jordanian lawyer Samieh Khreis, was previously among a number of international and Egyptian legal observers who were turned away by security officials when they attempted to enter the Supreme Military Court during its last session on 15 July. Observers were also turned away when they attempted to attend a previous session of the trial on 3 June 2007.

Egyptian authorities have given no explanation to date for their refusal to allow independent observers to attend the trial, adding to concerns about its fairness.

The 40 defendants facing trial on 5 August 2007 include leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who face charges of terrorism and money-laundering that could incur the death penalty.

All are being tried before a military court on the express instructions of President Mubarak -- using powers under a 1966 law -- although none hold any position within Egypt's armed forces.

Seventeen of the 40 were previously tried but acquitted on the same charges by a Cairo criminal court.

"We unreservedly oppose the Egyptian government's use of military courts to try civilians," said Irene Khan.

"In Egypt's military courts judges are serving members of the armed forces and military courts cannot be seen as independent and impartial tribunals for civilians. Their use for highly-charged political cases -- such as the current trial of leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood -- suggests that the defendants may be denied a fair trial."

"The fact that the government has so far denied international observers access to the court only exacerbates our grave concerns." Ms Khan said

Background

Amnesty International observers have previously attended other military court trials in Egypt, most recently in February 2002 when another trial of Muslim Brotherhood members was being heard by the Supreme Military Court.

Since then, the Egyptian government has amended the Code of Military Justice to provide for a right of appeal to a higher military court, but this has not assuaged Amnesty International's opposition to the use of military courts to try civilians on the grounds that they cannot guarantee fair trials.

To see a fuller fact sheet outlining Amnesty International's concerns regarding the trial of civilians before Egyptian military courts, please go to:

Public Document

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