

To: Medical professionals
From: Medical office / Middle East Program
Date: 14 January 1997

MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION

Prison conditions EGYPT

Keywords

Theme: Prison conditions; torture and ill-treatment

Summary

Amnesty International is concerned at the extent to which prison conditions are affecting political prisoners, including thousands of people held in administrative detention, in Egyptian prisons. Amnesty International has received consistent reports that these prisons lack adequate medical care and facilities, that prisoners are detained in cramped and unhygienic conditions, that the food provided is inadequate and of poor quality and that in some prisons, torture and ill-treatment are practised by security officers on a routine basis. These poor conditions have resulted in the serious ill-health of large numbers of prisoners, the rapid spread of diseases throughout prisons (the most commonly reported diseases include asthma, pulmonary pneumonia and skin diseases) and in the deaths in custody of at least four individuals in 1996. Furthermore, prisoners held in the High Security Prison in Tora and Istiqbal Tora Prison have been denied the basic right to receive visits from lawyers and family members, following decrees issued by the Ministry of Interior in December 1993 and September 1994, respectively. Al-Fayoum Prison, opened in May 1995, has also been closed for visits for prolonged periods on several occasions. This ban violates both international human rights standards and national legislation.

Recommended Actions

Letters are requested from medical professionals to the addresses given below:

- expressing concern at reports of the inadequate level of medical care and facilities and of the poor conditions of detention in Egyptian prisons;
- expressing concern at the serious implications to prisoners' health resulting from the lack of adequate medical care and facilities and poor prison conditions, and at reports that at least four people died in custody in 1996, reportedly as a result of being deprived of the necessary medical treatment.
- expressing concern at the torture and ill-treatment of prisoners in Egyptian prisons, and urging that prompt, thorough and impartial investigations be carried out into all allegations of torture and that the methods and findings of these investigations be made public within reasonable time;
- expressing concern at the practice of administrative detention in Egypt, noting that this practice appears to be facilitating the torture and ill-treatment of detainees in Egyptian prisons;

- urging that all those held in Egyptian prisons are treated humanely, have access to the necessary medical care and facilities and that the conditions of detention in Egyptian prisons are brought into line with internationally agreed minimum standards for detention;
- expressing concern at the banning of visits to prisoners in two Egyptian prisons by order of the Ministry of the Interior and the banning of visits to a third prison for prolonged periods. Stress that this is in violation of both international human rights standards and national legislation, and urge that all prisoners are permitted access to their families and lawyers.

Addresses

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Please send **copies** of letters to the nearest diplomatic representative of Egypt.

Date: 14 January 1997

<p style="text-align: center;">PRISON CONDITIONS EGYPT</p>

Amnesty International is concerned at the extent to which prison conditions are affecting the well-being of political prisoners, including thousands of people held in administrative detention, in Egyptian prisons. In some cases, conditions amount to cruel and inhuman treatment. Amnesty International has received consistent reports that the lack of adequate medical care and facilities, cramped and unhygienic conditions and inadequate and poor quality food in Egyptian prisons has resulted in, or contributed to, the ill-health of large numbers of prisoners, the rapid spread of diseases throughout prisons (the most commonly occurring problems include asthma, pulmonary pneumonia and skin diseases) and the deaths in custody of at least four individuals in 1996. Furthermore, in some prisons, security officers routinely torture and ill-treat prisoners. Amnesty International is concerned that the practice of torture and ill-treatment in prisons is facilitated by the administrative detention of thousands of individuals, and by the incommunicado detention of those held in the High Security Prison in Tora and Istiqbal Tora Prison, to which visits were banned in December 1993 and September 1994 respectively, following decrees issued by the Ministry of the Interior. Al-Fayoum Prison, opened in May 1995, has also been closed to visits for prolonged periods on a number of occasions.

According to information received by Amnesty International, most Egyptian prisons lack even the most basic medical facilities necessary for the treatment of prisoners' health problems. Most prisons have no medical personnel on site, and only basic medication such as analgesics and cream for the treatment of skin diseases, such as scabies, are available. Both the High Security Prison in Tora and al-Fayoum Prison reportedly receive no more than once-weekly visits by doctors, who dispense only the most basic of medicines. Amnesty International has also received reports that seriously ill prisoners in need of specialized care have not been transferred to hospitals. The lack of adequate medical facilities and care in places of detention is in direct contravention of both international human rights standards and national legislation. The UN Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons Under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment (United Nations, 1988), principle 24, notes,

“A proper medical examination shall be offered to a detained or imprisoned person as promptly as possible after his admission to a place of detention or imprisonment, and thereafter medical care and treatment shall be provided whenever necessary. This care and treatment shall be provided free of charge”.

The UN Principles of Medical Ethics relating to the care of prisoners and detainees, principle 1, also state:

“Health personnel, particularly physicians, charged with the medical care of prisoners and detainees have the duty to provide them with protection of their physical and mental health and treatment of disease of the same quality and standard as is afforded to those who are not imprisoned or detained.”

Article four of the Egyptian Law Regulating Prisons stipulates that there should be a medical doctor employed on site in all prisons who is responsible for the health care and treatment of prisoners. The doctor's duties include: examining each prisoner as soon as possible upon their

arrival at the prison, (but no later than the morning of the day after their arrival), to establish their health condition; examining those patients who are ill on a daily basis, and referring those in need of hospital treatment to the prison hospital, or, if necessary, to a hospital outside the prison; examining those prisoners held in solitary confinement on a daily basis; examining all prisoners at least once a week, and conducting a surgery at least once a day. If the prison doctor is absent from the prison for any reason, the prison director is responsible for replacing him or her with another Ministry of Health doctor.

Two cases drawn to the attention of Amnesty International are those of:

- **'Abd al-Rahman 'Abd al-Fattah 'Abdallah Mohammad** who died in Qasr al-'Aini hospital in Cairo on 7 October 1996 at the age of 53. He had been among the 54 members of the *Muslim Brothers* organization sentenced to up to five years' imprisonment with hard labour in two separate cases by the Supreme Military Court in Cairo on 23 November 1995. He was being held in Mazra'at Tora Prison, and had been transferred from there to the hospital a few days prior to his death. He had allegedly been suffering from medical problems and is reported to have died as a result of a blood clot which began in his leg and for which he did not receive anti-coagulant medication or other medical treatment while in prison.
- **'Abd al-Ra'ouf Amir al-Guyush**, aged 45, who was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment on 31 May 1995 by the Cairo Supreme Military Court in a trial involving 42 alleged members of the banned Islamist group *Talai' al-Fatah* [Vanguard of the Conquest] and has been held since then in the High Security Prison in Tora. He is reported to be suffering from a number of medical problems for which he has been denied access to proper medical attention. According to Amnesty International's information, his lawyer has lodged a complaint with the Public Prosecutor's Office to allow the prisoner to have proper medical attention outside the prison.

Amnesty International has also received numerous reports providing information on serious overcrowding in Egyptian prisons. Large numbers of prisoners are housed in cramped and poorly ventilated cells in which the humidity often reaches unacceptably high levels, particularly during the summer. Prisoners are locked in their cells for the greater part of the day, and are often only allowed one hour per day in the fresh air. This confinement undoubtedly contributes to severe respiratory and allergy related ailments among prisoners, and to the rapid spread of contagious diseases such as scabies and other skin diseases. The outbreak and spread of disease is also exacerbated by the grossly inadequate standards of hygiene in Egyptian prisons. Water supplies and washing and toilet facilities are severely limited, and prisoners are not provided with sufficient clothing or blankets.

Two prisoners suffering from the respiratory and skin complaints which are common among those held in Egyptian prisons are:

- **Taha Shahhata Mohammad Ahmad**, a student at Cairo University Science Faculty, has been imprisoned since 11 November 1994 in al-Fayoum Prison. He is reportedly suffering from pulmonary pneumonia and scabies.
- **Mohammad Isma'il 'Abd al-Da'im**, a 30-year-old engineering graduate, is being held in Tora Industrial Prison. He is reportedly suffering from scabies and also from a form of paralysis. [Amnesty International has no further details of his paralysis.]

Inadequate diet is also a significant contributory factor in the ill-health of prisoners. The Egyptian Law Regulating Prisons stipulates that prisoners' food rations should include 14 meals per week, to comprise seven bean dishes, three lentil dishes, two meat dishes, one cheese dish, one stewed

vegetable dish and a portion of dried dates. Each prisoner should also receive a bread and rice ration. Amnesty International has received reports that in practice this ration is never met, and that the food provided is usually virtually inedible — allegedly undercooked and contaminated with insects, and served in filthy buckets. Prisoners are often forced to rely on food provided by relatives or obtained on the black market inside the prison.

Torture and ill-treatment of political prisoners in Egyptian prisons have become widespread. In al-Wadi al-Gadid and al-Fayoum prisons for example, the torture and ill-treatment of prisoners begin upon their arrival, when they are subjected to a “*Hafl al-Istiqbal*” (welcome party) during which they are forced to crawl to their cells on their hands and knees between two lines of security officers who beat them until they arrive at their cells. Prisoners are thereafter reportedly subjected to routine beatings by security officers.

Amnesty International has issued many reports about the systematic use of torture against political prisoners in Egypt. It has submitted details of many cases to the Egyptian authorities, requesting that all allegations of torture be subjected to prompt, thorough and impartial investigations and that the procedures followed and the findings of such investigations be made public within reasonable time. Though the Egyptian Government has repeatedly stated to Amnesty International that all allegations of torture are investigated, the organization has received no responses to any of its requests for details of investigations carried out to date. In its May 1996 report, the UN Committee against Torture, too, concluded that “torture is systematically practised by the Security forces in Egypt, in particular by State Security Intelligence”.

Amnesty International fears that the torture and ill-treatment of political prisoners in Egypt is facilitated by the practice of administrative detention (some detainees have been held for over six years without charge or trial) and by the prolonged incommunicado detention of large numbers of political prisoners. Political prisoners who are charged, and who claim to have been subjected to torture, may be examined by forensic medical doctors at the request of the Public Prosecutor’s office, or the trial court. Administrative detainees, held without charge or trial, usually have no opportunity to submit a complaint about their treatment to the competent authorities. Prisoners held in the High Security Prison in Tora and Istiqbal Tora Prison have had no access to lawyers or families since December 1993 and September 1994 respectively, as a result of bans on visits to these prisons imposed by the Ministry of the Interior. Visits have also been banned for prolonged periods of time on several occasions to al-Fayoum Prison, opened in May 1995. These bans totally disregard both national legislation — articles 38, 39 and 40 of the Egyptian Law Regulating Prisons which guarantee prisoners’ rights to visits by lawyers and families — and international human rights standards: Principle 15 of the Body of Principles states that “communication of the detained or imprisoned person with the outside world, and in particular his family or counsel, shall not be denied for more than a matter of days.” Furthermore, the Cairo Administrative Court has issued four rulings — on 29 March 1994, 27 December 1994, 24 January 1995 and 14 March 1995 — declaring that the banning of visits to prisons for unspecified periods is in clear breach of the law. However, these rulings have been ignored by the Minister of the Interior.

Selected Amnesty International Reports on Egypt, 1991 - 1996:

1. *Egypt: Ten years of torture* (AI Index MDE 12/18/91), October 1991.
2. *Egypt: Security police detentions undermine the rule of law* (AI Index: MDE 12/01/92), January 1992.
3. *Egypt: Grave human rights abuses amid political violence* (AI Index: MDE 12/03/93), 1993;
4. *Egypt: Deaths in custody* (AI Index: MDE 12/18/95), October 1995;
5. *Egypt: Indefinite detention and systematic torture: the forgotten victims* (AI Index: MDE 12/13/96), July 1996.