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Suleiman's death must not prevent accountability for renditions to Egypt

The death last week of Omar Suleiman, former chief of the Egyptian General Intelligence, must lead to the Egyptian authorities pursuing accountability for human rights violations committed during renditions to Egypt in the 2000s, not to turning the page on this episode, Amnesty International said today.

Omar Suleiman, who also served for 14 days as vice-president during the last days of Hosni Mubarak's rule, was the alleged mastermind of renditions to Egypt. He is reported to have died in the USA on 19 July after routine medical tests.

Between 2000 and 2006, an unknown number of individuals suspected of links to terrorism were arrested or abducted in various countries around the world, forcibly transferred to Egypt in secret or otherwise without due process, and interrogated, held incommunicado for long periods and tortured while in the custody of the Egyptian General Intelligence and the now-defunct State Security Investigations (SSI) services.

For years questions on renditions to Egypt have remained unanswered. The death of Omar Suleiman must lead to long-overdue independent and impartial investigations into Egypt's role in the US-led renditions programme.

During a visit to the USA in May 2005, former Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif admitted that 60 or 70 people had been transferred to Egypt by US intelligence services since September 2001. When questioned about this statement during a visit to London in March 2006, he said that "[t]hat number would vary over time, so it is very difficult to pin it down".

Neither these nor any other statements by Egyptian government officials have clarified which authorities were responsible for the arrests and detentions, where the detainees were held, whether they had access to the outside world, or whether there were plans to charge and try the detainees. The Egyptian authorities have also failed to divulge the identities of those detained and the circumstances of their return.

Renditions to Egypt included Egyptian and non-Egyptian nationals. Because the transfers circumvented normal legal procedures the victims were deprived of their right to argue that sending them to Egypt would violate their human rights, for instance because they would face a risk of torture or arbitrary detention in Egypt.

A number of those sent to Egypt were in fact detained and tortured. Egyptian national Usama Mostafa Hassan Nasr (known as Abu Omar), who was abducted in Italy and transferred to Egypt in 2003, said he was tortured during the 14 months he was detained at the General Intelligence and the former SSI premises, including with electric shocks to sensitive parts of his body, a form of crucifixion on a metal door and a wooden apparatus, beatings with electric cables and water hoses, and whipping. He was released in April 2004 but rearrested 23 days later because he told relatives he had been tortured while detained. He remained in administrative detention without charge or trial until his release in February 2007.

Many of the Egyptian nationals who were transferred to Egypt had been tried in absentia in grossly unfair trials before military courts. The “Returnees from Albania” trial is one such trial where a number of defendants were sentenced to prison terms in their absence in 1999. They included Sayed Imam Fadl and five others, who were transferred from Yemen in 2002, and Ahmed Agiza, who was transferred from Sweden in 2001. Both Sayed Iman Fadl and Ahmed Agiza were released from prison in Egypt last year. Ahmed Agiza, who had refugee status in Sweden before his arrest and rendition to Egypt in 2001, was able to obtain a permanent residency permit in Sweden earlier this month.

Mohamed Mahjoub, another defendant in the “Returnees from Albania” trial, was arrested by the Canadian authorities in 2000 under a “security certificate”, apparently on the basis of, among other things, his 15-year prison sentence in Egypt. He continues to be held in Canada under restrictive conditions.

While Egypt was a key destination in the US-led global “war on terror”, no Egyptian official has so far been investigated in connection with the human rights violations committed against the victims of renditions.

During his opening speech as Egypt’s President, Mohamed Morsi promised to establish the rule of law. Amnesty International believes that one concrete step towards strengthening the rule of law would be to order a full inquiry into the role Egyptian authorities and intelligence services played in the renditions programme and bring those found responsible to justice.