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Egypt: Killings must stop - clear commitment by armed groups crucial

Hundreds have lost their lives in Egypt as Islamist groups use violence against civilians as a means to achieving their political objectives while the security forces have resorted to "brutal" methods in the name of fighting "terrorism", Amnesty International said in a new report today.

The human rights organization is releasing its report today to expose the gross human rights abuses perpetrated by armed groups, particularly *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* and *al-Gihad*, which have left at least 1,300 people dead since the beginning of 1992.

While political violence has diminished considerably over the past eight months – with *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* issuing statements highlighting its willingness to stop all acts of violence – Amnesty International remains seriously concerned that these statements have not specifically addressed the issue of killing civilians.

"It is imperative that *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* and *al-Gihad* both state publicly – and unequivocally – that they will never kill civilians again. Only then may there be some hope that past atrocities will not be repeated," Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization is also reminding the Egyptian Government of its responsibility in protecting all civilians.

"The government should take seriously its responsibility of protecting the lives of civilians but this should be done within the rule of law," Amnesty International said. "Respect for human rights is an essential pre-requisite for ending a climate of violence which has pitted the security forces against armed Islamist groups."

Al-Gihad, whose activities are concentrated mainly in the capital, has targeted senior government and military officials, including the three attempted assassinations of three ministers in 1993. *Al-Gama'a al-Islamiya*, active mainly in Upper Egypt, has targeted Coptic Christians, tourists, policemen and officers from the State Security Investigations Department.

Al-Gama'a al-Islamiya has been responsible for grave human rights abuses of concern to Amnesty International in the country in recent years. Hundreds of civilians have been deliberately killed because of their actual or supposed religious beliefs or nationalities.

Recognizing the importance of tourism to the Egyptian economy *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* has waged a five-year war against tourists and the tourism industry. Members of *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* ambushed and attacked buses, Nile cruise boats and passenger trains carrying foreign tourists and urged foreign tourists not to travel to Egypt. The deadliest massacre of civilians that Egypt witnessed in recent years took place on 17 November 1997 in which 58 foreign tourists and four Egyptians were killed in an armed attack at a historical site near Luxor. The six gunmen who carried out the attack were later killed by the security forces following a shoot-out.

Scores of Coptic Christians have also been deliberately and arbitrarily killed by members of *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya*. Most of the killings took place between May 1992 and the end of 1997 in Minya, Asyut and Qena governorates, all in Upper Egypt. Those killed were reportedly targeted because of their religion.

The most recent massacre of Coptic Christians took place on 12 February 1997 when, in the early evening in the town of Abu Qerqas near Minya in Upper Egypt, five armed and masked men, believed to be members of *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya*, burst into Saint George's church and opened fire at 30 young Coptic Christians who were attending a weekly religious gathering. Nine people died instantly.

Al-Gama'a al-Islamiya and *al-Gihad* have both targeted writers, journalists, university professors, judges and other public figures who have openly condemned the two armed groups. The groups said they considered them to be "atheists" or accused them of supporting the government. For example *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* claimed responsibility for the attempted assassination on 14 October 1994 of Nagib Mahfouz, Egypt's best known writer and the 1988 Nobel prize winner for literature.

"While *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* and *al-Gihad* have committed extensive acts of violence, the Egyptian Government has also meted out severe punishments in its fight against 'terrorism' which have contributed to a climate conducive to human rights abuses," Amnesty International alleged.

There have been mass arrest of suspected members of or sympathizers with *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* and *al-Gihad*. Many continue to be held without charge or trial in administrative detention, or since the end of 1992, were tried before Military Courts whose procedures fall far short of international standards for fair trial. Torture has been used systematically against Islamist detainees.

"It is time the government understands that human rights violations as a response to human rights abuses are only exacerbating a seemingly endless cycle of violence," Amnesty International said.

The organization is also calling on all armed groups in the country to respect minimum human rights and humanitarian standards, and specifically the right to life.

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For further information please see Amnesty International's report: *Egypt: Human rights abuses by armed groups*, September 1998, AI Index: MDE 12/22/98.

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