

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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## **Egypt: The dirty secret behind some of Cairo's development dreams**

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Egyptian lawyer Abdel Nasser Ahmed Mohamed Alsayed still struggles to live with the memories of the day he was forced out of his house in Old Cairo.

It was March 2009. Riot police showed up, beat him and threw his belongings out the window. Lorries then took his furniture, books and everything he worked hard for to '6 October City' and dumped them on the street.

The Egyptian authorities gave Abdel Nasser a small flat, 45 kilometres outside Old Cairo, but he never got a contract so he now faces being evicted again.

But nearly five years on, as he sits in front of a United Nations Committee in Geneva today, Abdel Nasser feels that someone is finally listening to his side of the story.

"We were seen in the eyes of the government as having neither opinions nor rights, and treated as subjects that can be repressed, as if we were not humans who have rights and views," he told Amnesty International.

### **Skyscrapers vs homes**

Abdel Nasser's experience is tragically common in Cairo after the government in 2008 issued a development plan known as "Cairo 2050" – renamed "Cairo 2052" after the uprising in 2011 – aiming to modernize the city.

Many believe the plan ignores the real problem facing millions when it comes to housing in Cairo and it is simply a way to justify clearing out slums to make way for lucrative housing developments.

Amnesty International said the plan could lead to mass forced evictions.

"The Egyptian authorities are not addressing poverty. The plan will uproot thousands of Egypt's poorest from their jobs and social networks, and dump them in new cities, without job opportunities and services," said Nicholas Piachaud, Campaigner on North Africa at Amnesty International, who is attending the UN session in Geneva.

Twelve million Egyptians currently live in informal settlements, many driven there by a crisis in affordable housing.

For them, every day is a struggle for dignity. Some communities live under unstable cliffs or high-voltage power lines. Some even live in graveyards.

Marwa Fouad is one of them. When Amnesty International met her in 2010, she lived in the burned-out remains of her home in the informal settlement of Al-Duwaqa.

As her home went up in flames after an accident, she had to throw her twin babies from the balcony to save them, praying that her neighbours below would be able to catch them. The babies survived.

When her pleas for temporary shelter and alternative housing were ignored by the Neighbourhood Authority, she had no other choice but to move back into the ruins of her home.

**Under scrutiny**

Nearly five years after he was forced out of his home, Abdel Nasser will finally have an opportunity to be heard.

Today, Egyptian government representatives are in Geneva, where they are sitting in front of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to answer questions about the country's human rights situation.

Egypt has told the Committee that its national housing programme will deliver thousands of new homes. However, questions remain over whether Egypt's poorest will be able to afford them, and whether supply will truly meet demand.

"The truth is that there are no quick fixes for Egypt's housing crisis. But immediate measures could be taken. The Egyptian authorities could, for example, pass a law prohibiting forced evictions and ensure any plans affecting communities are brought to those communities for consultation and participation," said Nicholas Piachaud.

The fact that human rights activists have the chance to speak to the UN is a good sign. But there are fears the Egyptian authorities might soon curtail such opportunities too.

Even while the government is telling the UN about their human rights achievements, they are preparing new laws to restrict protesters and human rights organizations, including those working in slums. One of those is a draft counter-terror law that, human rights activists say, would shut down their ability to criticize the government.

One activist told Amnesty International: "I could be arrested just for speaking here."