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Algeria: The wall of silence around thousands of "disappearances" crumbles



*"I've waited for so long, I'll do anything which might bring us some news. The Algerian security forces can gun us down in the streets for all I care"
(Mother of a "disappeared")*

The wall of silence which had surrounded the "disappearance" of some 3000 Algerian men and women over the past six years has begun to crack, thanks to the relentless efforts of their mothers, wives and other relatives, Amnesty International said in a new report today.

In the past year more and more families of "disappeared", driven by despair, overcame their fear and their increasingly persistent protests and lobbying forced the issue to be debated in parliament, on the streets and on the front pages of the

national press.

"This is a major breakthrough because now those who -- in Algeria or elsewhere -- claimed that the problem of "disappearances" did not exist can no longer do so. Now no one can say: 'I did not know'," Amnesty International said.

People from every walk of life have been taken from their homes, place of work or from the street, often in the presence of their families, colleagues or neighbours, by the army, police, gendarmerie, or other security forces or by paramilitary militias armed by the state. These groups of armed men, wearing uniform or plain clothes virtually never show any arrest or search warrant.

The phenomenon of "disappearances", which has developed against a backdrop of a deadly human rights crisis in Algeria, has been reinforced by unfair arrest and detention procedures. "Arbitrary arrest and secret detention have been routine in Algeria for the past seven years", Amnesty International said.

The fate of the vast majority of "disappeared", remains unknown. Only a tiny percentage of the 3,000 gone missing have reappeared after prolonged periods in secret detention.

Algerian law limits incommunicado (*garde à vue - note for translators*) detention to a maximum of 12 days and the detainee's families must be immediately informed of their arrest. However, in practice, the law is routinely breached as detainees are often held in secret detention for weeks and months, or even years.

"Detainees' families are virtually never able to obtain any information on their relatives' whereabouts. In most cases, they face a wall of silence as the authorities and security forces deny all knowledge of the detainees until these are released or transferred to a recognized prison," Amnesty International said.

The authorities usually deny that the "disappeared" were ever arrested, or allege that they have joined a "terrorist group" or that they were "terrorists" killed by the security forces in armed clashes or that they were kidnapped by "terrorists".

At times the authorities provide different and contradictory explanations for the same case. Thus according to official reports the same person may be alive, dead, a "terrorist" and a "victim of terrorists". As long as no independent investigations are carried out the "disappeared" will remain unaccounted for and those responsible for the "disappearances" will continue to enjoy impunity.

"Mothers of detainees have reported being verbally and even physically abused when they went to police stations or gendarmeries to investigate the fate of their sons", the report said, adding that "in a desperate bid to find even the smallest scrap of news, many have travelled to hospitals and army barracks or spent hours searching in morgues and cemeteries."

"Yet, thousand of families have continued to search for their missing relatives with relentless courage and determination. Since 1994, Amnesty International has been contacted by thousands of families seeking help to trace their "disappeared" relatives."

Among its recommendations, Amnesty International's report is calling for a full, impartial and independent investigation to be launched into all cases of "disappearances".

Background

Having repeatedly sought information from the Algerian government and the judicial authorities, in September 1997, a group of mothers of "disappeared" attempted to break the wall of silence. They unsuccessfully tried to meet foreign delegates attending a conference in Algiers organized by the ONDH, the official human rights body, but were turned away by security forces.

A month later, they gathered in the centre of the capital to demonstrate while foreign journalists were in town to cover the local elections. They were quickly dispersed by the security forces but some had time to wave photographs and identification documents of their "disappeared" sons and daughters in front of the camera lenses of the world press.

Last year, opposition members in the Algerian parliament started to question the government about the issue and this encouraged more and more families submitted the cases of their "disappeared" relatives to political parties and multiplied requests with the authorities.

A delegation of mothers, wives, grandmothers and fathers of "disappeared" toured European capitals in July 1998 to raise awareness of their plight. The same month, the United Nations Human Rights

Committee called on the Algerian government to address, among others, the issue of “disappearances”. A few weeks later hundreds of families began demonstrating in Algeria. ENDS.../