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Egypt must stop police intimidation of dead detainee's family

Amnesty International today urged the Egyptian authorities to order security police to stop harassing and intimidating the family of a man allegedly tortured to death in detention after being arrested in connection with the 1 January bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria.

Sayyed Bilal was detained in Alexandria on 5 January by State Security Investigations (SSI) officers, and was dead by the next day. His family filed a complaint with the public prosecutor in Alexandria alleging that he was tortured to death, and have since been reportedly threatened by the SSI officers with detention and deaths of further family members.

“Both the death of Sayyed Bilal and the reported threats against his family are very disturbing developments and point to a continuing pattern of unlawful behaviour by the SSI, which has long been accused of using torture,” said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International’s director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“The Egyptian authorities must take immediate measures to protect the family, ensure an independent investigation into Sayyed Bilal’s death, and safeguard other detained suspects from torture or other ill-treatment.”

Another young man has reportedly disappeared in detention at the same Alexandria police station and at the same time as Sayyed Bilal. Yesterday the public prosecutor ordered an investigation into the whereabouts of Mohamed Ismail Mahmoud who was also arrested on 5 January by SSI officers in connection with the Coptic church bombing and who was detained, like Sayyed Bilal, at al-Labban Police Station.

The 1 January bombing of an Alexandria Coptic church which killed 23 people was followed by a wave of arrests of suspects in Alexandria, mostly salafists - followers of orthodox Islamic teaching. An unknown number are being held incommunicado and are at serious risk of torture.

Sayyed Bilal is reported to have been 32 years old and in good health when arrested and detained at al-Labban police station, apparently under suspicion of possessing information about the Coptic church bomb attack.

The next day, on 6 January, Sayyed Bilal’s family reportedly received a phone call from the Zeqileh Medical Centre near al-Labban police station. When family members arrived at the hospital, Sayyed Bilal was dead, his body covered with injuries that his family allege were the result of torture.

Since filing the complaint and speaking to the media, the Sayyed Bilal’s family has faced increasing intimidation from SSI officers.

The family has reportedly been summoned twice by the SSI and threatened with the detention and deaths of Sayyed Bilal’s brother or another member of the family. The family was apparently told that detention

orders had already been prepared, and were ready to be carried out at any time.

Plain-clothes police have been stationed around the family home to prevent them meeting with human rights workers and journalists. As a result, the family are said to be afraid to engage a lawyer to represent them or to go to the public prosecutor's office.

"This harassment and intimidation must stop, and stop now," said Malcolm Smart. "The Egyptian authorities should be leaving no stone unturned to find the truth about what happened to cause an apparently fit and healthy man to die within hours of his arrest."

The public prosecutor is reported to have opened an investigation and ordered that an autopsy be conducted. The autopsy was carried out but its findings are not yet known.

"It is vital in cases of this nature that the authorities act very promptly to investigate the death and collect all relevant evidence, including forensic evidence," said Malcolm Smart. "If Sayyed Bilal was tortured to death, those responsible must be brought to justice – SSI officials should not be afforded immunity, as so often seems to have been the case in the past."

The SSI has been accused of using torture and other ill-treatment against detainees over many years. While very few have been tried, no SSI officer has ever been convicted of torture.

A rare prosecution of one SSI officer for the alleged torture to death of detainee Mohamed Abdelkader al-Sayyed in 2003 resulted in his acquittal by a Cairo criminal court in September 2007. The dead man's family was said by lawyers to have been pressured by SSI officers to drop the case.