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Egypt: Admission of forced ‘virginity tests’ must lead to justice

The Egyptian authorities must bring those responsible for ordering or conducting forced ‘virginity tests’ to justice following a senior military figure’s admission that the army subjected female protesters to them, Amnesty International said today.

A senior Egyptian general told CNN that women detained on 9 March at Cairo’s Tahrir Square had been forced to undergo ‘virginity tests’, which the government has previously denied.

The general, speaking on condition of anonymity, justified the abuse by saying that the women “were not like your daughter or mine. These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters.”

“This admission is an utterly perverse justification of a degrading form of abuse,” said Amnesty International. “The women were subjected to nothing less than torture.”

“The Egyptian authorities must condemn these discriminatory, abusive and insulting attitudes which have been used to justify torture of women protesters, and which are clearly present at the highest levels.

Amnesty International gathered the testimonies of women protesters subjected to forced ‘virginity tests’ in March, and wrote to Egypt’s Supreme Council for Armed Forces requesting an investigation. However, no response was received.

The general also told CNN that the reason for the ‘tests’ was “[w]e didn’t want them to say we had sexually assaulted or raped them, so we wanted to prove that they weren’t virgins in the first place.”

“This general’s implication that only virgins can be victims of rape is a long-discredited sexist attitude and legal absurdity. When determining a case of rape, it is irrelevant whether or not the victim is a virgin.”

“The army must immediately instruct security forces and soldiers that such ‘tests’ are banned.”

When army officers violently cleared Tahrir Square on 9 March – the day after International Women’s Day – 18 women were detained, beaten, given electric shocks, of which 17 were then subjected to strip searches, forced to submit to ‘virginity tests’ and threatened with prostitution charges.

The women were brought before a military court on 11 March and released on 13 March. Several received one-year suspended sentences for charges including disorderly conduct, destroying property, obstructing traffic and possession of weapons.

Amnesty International fears that discriminatory and patriarchal attitudes towards women in Egypt are standing in the way of women’s full participation in the reform process.

Although women were on the frontline on the mass nationwide protests that led to the resignation of

President Hosni Mubarak, no women were chosen to be part of the constitutional reform committee, and they have received little representation in the new government.

“Egypt’s government needs to uphold the rights of all of the nation’s women who are working for the country’s freedoms, especially those struggling for gender equality and rights for women,” said Amnesty International.