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Egypt: Military pledges to stop forced ‘virginity tests’

The head of Egypt’s military intelligence has promised Amnesty International that the army will no longer carry out forced ‘virginity tests’ after defending their use, during a meeting with the organisation in Cairo on Sunday.

Major General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), discussed the issue with Amnesty International’s Secretary General Salil Shetty months after the organisation publicized allegations of the forced ‘tests’.

Major General al-Sisi said that ‘virginity tests’ had been carried out on female detainees in March to "protect" the army against possible allegations of rape, but that such forced tests would not be carried out again. He also added that army would avoid detaining women in the future.

“The Major General’s comments must translate into unequivocal instructions to army staff that women are never forced to undergo this treatment again in Egypt,” said Amnesty International.

“Subjecting women to such degrading procedures hoping to show that they were not raped in detention makes no sense, and was nothing less than torture. The government should now provide reparation to the victims, including medical and psychological support, and apologise to them for their treatment.”

The Major General’s comments came during discussion of a range of human rights abuses, including the ongoing military trials of thousands of civilians including demonstrators, workers and people suspected of petty crimes.

When army officers violently cleared Tahrir Square on 9 March – the day after International Women’s Day – 17 women were detained, beaten, prodded with electric shock batons, 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.

That month, Amnesty International wrote to SCAF to investigate the women’s treatment, but received no direct reply or comment from them on the ‘virginity tests’ until the meeting.

In relation to abuses by the security forces during the uprising and in the past thirty years, Major General al-Sisi told Amnesty International at Sunday’s meeting that there was a need to change the culture of the security forces, and gave assurances that instructions had now been given not to use violence against demonstrators, and to protect detainees against ill-treatment.

Such a commitment is particularly welcome ahead of mass demonstrations called for 8 July in solidarity with families of victims of the uprising, and for greater social justice.

According to Major General al-Sisi, people alleging human rights abuses at the hands of the army should complain to the military prosecutor, and can also post their complaints on the SCAF Facebook page.

Major General al-Sisi also stressed the importance of ensuring social justice for all Egyptians, an aim shared by Amnesty International.

“We are hopeful that Egypt’s 25 January Revolution will ultimately lead to justice for those wronged and mistreated by security forces,” said Amnesty International. “But ultimately what matters are the actions of the Egyptian authorities, not their words.”

UPDATE: This story was amended on June 29 to reflect precisely the translation of the meeting.