

AI Index: PRE 01/337/2013
05 July 2013

Egypt: Crackdown on Morsi's supporters heralds new rights abuses

Amnesty International is warning against a crackdown on supporters of Mohamed Morsi, after documenting a new wave of arrests of Muslim Brotherhood leaders, raids on media and an incident in which a protester was killed by army live fire.

Since former President Mohamed Morsi was deposed on 3 July, Amnesty International has spoken to eyewitnesses who were fired on by the army in a street near Rabaa Aladaweya Square in Cairo's Nasr City that evening. Live ammunition was used on the pro-Morsi protest, and at least one demonstrator was killed.

"We fear that the violence of the last few days could spiral into a new wave of human rights abuses," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa Programme, amid reports that more pro-Morsi protesters were shot today as they marched on the headquarters of the Republican Guard in Cairo. "It also resurrects fears of the army's abysmal record on human rights."

In a statement posted on Facebook, Egypt's army said today that it would not suppress political groups and would uphold the right to protest and freedom of expression of all Egyptians.

"It is hard to see evidence of the Egyptian authorities' respect for freedom of assembly and expression when soldiers have shot a protester in the head who apparently posed no threat," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

Minutes after the army announced it had deposed the President, angry pro-Morsi protesters in Rabaa Al-Adaweya Square became involved in an altercation with soldiers securing the entry of the Square, and at the gate of a nearby military compound.

In the ensuing violence, the army fired live ammunition into the air and at protesters.

Amnesty International verified the death of at least one 20-year old protester who was shot in the head, and that at least three others were injured. Blood lay on the street on the morning of 4 July, in front of the gate of the military compound.

Amnesty International spoke to eyewitnesses in the hospital, who had been shot.

They said that the army had been shooting randomly from inside the military compound near the square. One had been shot while standing in the middle of the road, far from the gate of the compound, telling Amnesty International: "I saw soldiers behind the gate of the military compound shooting in my direction." He had also seen someone on the other side of the street shot in the head.

Another eyewitness present at the scene said: “I saw snipers on the roof of one of the buildings in the military compound”.

“The army and security forces must immediately stop using live ammunition against people posing no threat to life,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui. “They must stay impartial, do everything in their power to prevent, not cause, bloodshed, and uphold the right to peaceful protest without discrimination.”

Under international human rights standards, law enforcement officers must not use firearms except in the imminent threat of death or serious injury, and only as a last resort. Intentional lethal force may only be used when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

Eyewitness told Amnesty International that in the afternoon of 3 July, the army had tried to disperse the protests by shooting in the air and sending armoured personnel carriers in the direction of the protest, but they were stopped by the protestors.

They also stated that the army blocked the entry and exit points of the square for three hours in the afternoon. One man interviewed by Amnesty International in the hospital said his legs were broken after an altercation with an army officer in which he fell from a military vehicle, and was not able to go to the hospital for two hours as the army had sealed the square.

Amnesty International is calling for an independent and impartial investigation. Previous investigations into human rights abuses by the army or security forces led by army or public prosecutors have failed to provide justice.

At least two leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood have been imprisoned amid reports of further arrests: Deputy Leader Rashad Bayoumi and Saad El-Katatni, the Chair of the group’s Freedom and Justice Party. Amnesty International is urging the authorities to either charge them with an internationally recognisable criminal offence, or release them.

On 3 July, police raided television studios sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, taking the channels off-air and arresting staff. At least two people are still detained.

The Ministry of Health announced today that the political violence since 28 June had left 52 dead and over 2,619 injured.

Under the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces following the ‘25 January Revolution’, security forces including the army killed more than 120 protesters; military courts unfairly tried over 12,000 civilians; and the army arrested women protesters and subjected them to forced ‘virginity tests’.

“If human rights and the rule of law are to prevail in Egypt, the army must now ensure that these abuses are not repeated,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

“A crackdown on supporters of Morsi is simply sending the wrong signal.”

Additional background information:

ATTACKS ON PROTESTERS

At around 3pm on 3 July, the military and riot police (Central Security Forces or CSF) were deployed in Rabaa Aladaweya Square, the site of a protest by the former President’s supporters. The military and riot police secured the main entry points to the Square.

Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International that the army did not allow anyone to enter the Square, and that troops fired warning shots.

At around 5:00 pm, armoured personnel carriers tried to move into the square to disperse the protest, but

protesters stopped them by standing and lying in front of them.

One protester interviewed in hospital told Amnesty International that he had climbed onto one of the APCs and told the soldiers that the army belonged to all Egyptians. He then got into an argument with an army officer, who pushed him off the vehicle, causing him to fall and break both his legs. An ambulance only arrived two hours later, but the army did not allow them to take him to hospital for another two hours.

In the minutes after the army announced it had deposed President Mohamed Morsi, angry protesters became involved in a confrontation with soldiers guarding the entrance to the Square and the gate of a nearby military compound.

While it is not clear how violence broke out, the army shot live ammunition both into the air and at the protesters. A 20-year old protester was killed after being shot in the head, and at least three others were injured. An eyewitness told Amnesty International that at the time of the shooting he saw snipers on the roof of the military compound.

One of the injured, who was shot in the arm, told Amnesty International that he had been shot while he had been standing in the middle of the road, far from the gate of the military compound. He told the organization that the army had been shooting randomly, and that he had seen the army shoot one person on the other side of the street in the head.

Another eyewitness, who was shot in the leg, told Amnesty International that he had been shot while standing outside the gate to the military compound. He said that the army started to shoot randomly from inside the compound, and that soldiers behind the compound's gate had shot in his direction.

When Amnesty International visited the site the next morning, it saw blood in the street, much of it in front of the gate of the military compound. The organization's delegate also saw holes caused by shotgun pellets in street-light poles in the street where the people had been shot.

RAIDS ON MEDIA

Seconds after the army announced it had deposed President Mohamed Morsi, at least six stations were taken off the air, including Hafez, Al Jazeera Mubasher, Al-Khalijia, Misr 25, Al-Nas, and Al-Rahma. All are known for their support of Mohamed Morsi.

Just minutes later, security forces launched raids on the channels. Eyewitness told Amnesty International that police, special forces and plainclothes intelligence officers rounded-up the staff and held them in police vehicles.

While the security forces let most of the workers go, they took at least 14 men away and held them in the Security Directorate in 6 October City. The Directorate then told visiting relatives and others that they were not holding them.

Members of Al-Nas were reported to have been ill-treated in detention.

At time of writing, all but two of the channels' staff have been released. Hafez Channel Head Atef Abdelrashid and al-Fath's Administrative Director Abdallah Abdallah continue to be held. The charges against them are unclear.

The Freedom and Justice Party (FJP)'s newspaper has not been printed by the national press since 4 July.

ARRESTS OF MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD MEMBERS

Two leading Muslim Brotherhood figures have been arrested, Deputy Leader Rashad Bayoumi and Saad El-Katatni, the Chair of the FJP.

Both are being held in Cairo's Tora Prison.

The group's lawyer, Abdelminin Abdelmaqsoud, is also thought to have been detained as he went to attend interrogations at Tora Prison.

The charges against them are as yet unclear. Amnesty International has urged authorities to promptly charge those arrested with an internationally recognizable criminal offence or release them. All those detained must be given access to their lawyers, families, and adequate medical care without delay.

State newspaper Al-Ahram has reported the authorities have issued arrest warrants for 300 members of the Muslim Brotherhood, though the report is unverifiable. Former President Morsi himself is believed to be in the custody of the army.

The organization has noted its serious concerns about the army's human rights record, dating from the 17-month rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces after Hosni Mubarak was ousted from power in February 2011.

Army head Abdel Fattah al-Sisi had told Amnesty International there was a need to change the culture of the security forces to stop violence against demonstrators and to protect detainees against ill-treatment during a meeting with the organization's Secretary General in June 2011.

Yet under the rule of the SCAF the security forces, including the army, killed over 120 protesters, military courts unfairly tried over 12,000 civilians, and the army arrested women protesters and subjected them to forced "virginity tests".

The military promised effective investigations, but in practice chose to conduct investigations into abuses by its forces itself that were not independent and impartial.

Military courts have only convicted three low-ranking troops of killing protesters, during a 17-month period of military rule in which over 120 people were killed by the army and security forces.