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Egypt: Security forces must show restraint after reckless policing of violent protest

The killing of at least 1,089 people over the past week underscores the urgent need for Egypt's security forces to comply with international standards on the use of force and firearms, Amnesty International said.

In the bloodiest incident since the dispersal of the pro-Morsi sit-ins last week, 97 were killed in Cairo on 16 August when protests by supporters of the ousted President Mohamed Morsi culminating around Ramsis Square quickly plunged into violence. A child as young as seven and a number of teenagers were among those killed or wounded.

“Security forces failed to take control of the situation or respond to violence used against them in a measured and responsible way to minimize loss of life. Many bystanders also lost their lives,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director of the Middle East and North Africa for Amnesty International.

“The presence of armed individuals among protesters does not allow security forces to shoot randomly. The Egyptian authorities must make clear that a reckless use of force and firearms will not be tolerated. The security forces must protect all Egyptians from violence regardless of their political affiliation.

“As to those among protesters using firearms, they are not above the law. Anyone responsible for killings must face criminal prosecution.”

Evidence collected by Amnesty International indicates that some pro-Morsi supporters were heavily armed and used live ammunition against police and local residents who had sided with security forces. However, bystanders and non-violent protesters were also killed in the chaos that ensued.

Pro-Morsi supporters suspected of using live ammunition or other acts of violence should only be charged with internationally recognizable criminal offences and brought before civilian courts in fair proceedings.

The organization is calling for an urgent, impartial and independent investigation into the violence. Researchers visited a number of hospitals, including the Police Hospital in Agouza, the morgue, and the Azbakiya Police Station to interview injured protesters, security officials and local residents and gather evidence.

The death toll was highest near Ramsis Square, the epicentre of the latest clashes. Violence also flared-up in the Greater Cairo neighbourhoods of Ghamra, Shubra, and Giza.

Several pro-Morsi marches seeking to join the main protest at Ramsis Square on 16 August turned into violent confrontations between protesters and local residents, who sought to prevent demonstrators from accessing their neighbourhoods. Victims included Morsi supporters, local residents and members of the security forces.

Amnesty International researchers also saw a child of between the age of seven and 10 with a gunshot

wound rushed into Bula al-Dakroun Hospital. He died about five minutes later.

Among the bystanders caught up in the violence was a 21-year-old pro-Morsi protester shot in the leg as he tried to rescue those wounded. He told the organization's researchers: "I went...on my motorcycle to rescue injured protesters, as ambulances were not getting through, when I was shot in the leg...all around me there were injured protesters and lots of fire."

A protester told the organization that his female 18 year-old cousin, a pro-Morsi protester, was shot in the leg at about 2:30pm while standing near Ramsis Square, at an angle leading to the police station when injured.

At least three local residents died when Morsi supporters fired from the 15 May Bridge into the Bula abu Al-Ila neighbourhood below. Among them 19-year-old Yasser Mohamed, who according to witnesses was standing on a side street near his house, off 26 July Street, when fatally shot in the head at around 1pm.

Mohamed Moawad, whose 28-year-old brother Hany was also shot beneath 15 May Bridge, said: "My brother was on the 26 July Street trying to resist the protestors...shooting increased and the residents started to escape. He was then shot in the chest. The guy who went to save my brother and transport him on his motorcycle was shot in the head."

Fierce fighting lasted for hours around the Azbakiya Police Station, where scuffles between Morsi supporters and local residents escalated into heavy gun battles between protesters and security forces, supported by local residents. The building was later riddled with bullet holes. Casualties were documented on both sides, mostly caused by gunshot wounds.

The head of the Police Station, Brigadier-General Imad Fawzi, told Amnesty International that two lower-ranking members of the security forces died. Thirty more were injured in the violence.

Clashes which began shortly after Friday prayers near the al-Fath mosque grew fiercer once a pro-Morsi march arrived onto the 6 October Bridge seeking to join the main protest in Ramsis Square. Some pro-Morsi protesters found themselves pinned down with gunfire coming from two sides. Shooting came from the Bula abu Al-Ila neighbourhood, site of clashes with local residents, and from the Azbakiya Police Station and 6 October Bridge – leading to a number of trapped protesters jumping from the bridge.

A local reporter, Adel El Mahrouky, described the scene: "Protesters still on the bridge panicked and pulled back. Some of them clung to trees to get down from the bridge."

According to security officials and other independent eyewitnesses, gunmen fired on the police station from within the larger crowd of pro-Morsi protesters. Others shot in the direction of the police station from the rooftops of surrounding buildings including the Hilal al-Ahmar Hospital and the Tawhid wa al-Nour Store.

When asked how security officials differentiated between armed protesters and those not endangering their lives, an injured high-ranking officer present at the Azbakiya Police Station told Amnesty International:

"The armed groups hide among those unarmed. We were under fire from all directions; how are we to distinguish between them? Do we wait until our munitions run out, and are slaughtered like what happened in Kerdassa, Hilwan and Doumat [reference to police stations attacked last week]?"

"Security forces must implement a strategy in line with international standards that enables them to take control of the situation without causing a bloodbath," said Hassiba Hadj Saharaoui.

“Unlawful killings and the use of excessive force by the security forces must be investigated as an immediate priority. Without accountability the bloodshed in Egypt will only continue.”

Background

Breakdown of death toll

At least 483 people died in Cairo when security forces forcibly dispersed pro-Morsi sit-ins on 14 August, including nine members of the security forces. The main Cairo morgue at Zeinhum carried out 288 autopsies on bodies of those killed during the dispersal of the Rabaa al-Adawiya sit-in. Seven of them were members of security forces. A further 173 bodies, kept at the Imam Mosque, converted into a makeshift morgue, were examined separately by Health Ministry officials.

According to official sources, another 22 people died during the dispersal of the Nahda sit-in on 14 August, including two members of the security forces.

A further 252 people were killed in Greater Cairo, between 14 and 18 August, including 20 members of security forces. Seventeen of them were killed when the Kerdassa police station was attacked including by a Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG).

A further 341 people died across the country between 14 and 18 August, including in the governorates of Alexandria, Al-Minya, Beni Suef, Ismailiya, Suez, Souhag, Doumrat, and Mansoura. According to morgue officials, all - save 2 or 3- died as a result of gunshot wounds.

On 19 August, autopsies were carried out on 37 bodies of detainees killed during transfer to Abu Zaabal Prison, in unclear circumstances. According to morgue officials they died as a result of suffocation, when teargas canisters were fired inside the vehicle transporting them.

Ramsis clashes

Clashes started shortly after Friday prayers at the nearby Fath Mosque ended. The violence was triggered when Morsi supporters approached the Azbakiya Police Station clashing with men in civilian dress, purported to be local residents, standing in front of the police station to “protect” it. Confrontations using rocks and fireworks quickly degenerated into shotguns and live bullets. Security forces initially appear to have stood behind, firing teargas and live ammunition into the pro-Morsi crowd as confrontations intensified. Shots were fired from the four stories of the police station and its rooftop. Security reinforcements arrived, including three police vans stationed on top of the 6 October Bridge, as well as members of the riot police, the Central Security Forces (CSF). At least one armoured police vehicle was stationed on al-Galaa street near the police station, while helicopters were flying overhead during the clashes.

Fierce fighting lasted for hours around the Azbakiya Police Station, where clashes between Morsi supporters and local residents quickly degenerated into the exchange of heavy gunfire between protesters and security forces. Casualties were documented on both sides, mostly deaths and injuries as a result of gunshot wounds.

An eyewitness, Islam Yehia, who was initially standing by the police station on the side of security forces told Amnesty International: “I saw the police shooting live ammunition from an armoured vehicle in front of the station in al-Galaa street ... Protesters were shooting from the other side of Ramsis street towards the police station .. and from the roof of buildings .. I saw three bystanders shot beside me. .. Then the shootings increased towards the police station..we [observers] hid in the side street... I took shelter behind one of the fridges in the market. The bullets were hitting the ground and the walls. I saw around seven

bystanders and one police officer transferred by people on motorcycles passing through the side street.”

Another security officer, part of the force sent as reinforcements on 6 October Bridge, told Amnesty International that security forces initially fired teargas into the protesters coming from 15 May Bridge, continuing: “ they got closer and fired on us, including with machine guns... They were shooting from the rooftops of building, including the Hilal Hospital, and the Gamiya Shariya..Hani al-Sayed [low ranking security officer] standing on 6 October Bridge was shot in the mouth and died at about 4:00pm... they are trained people, he was wearing full riot gear, and they got him in the mouth.” He said that three others from his force were injured.

According to injured pro-Morsi supporters, most were killed and injured in the vicinity of the Azbakiya Police Station. An eyewitness present at the nearby Sidnawi Hospital, which received 58 bodies, told Amnesty International: “The first fatal casualty from gunshot wounds arrived shortly after prayer, then we received bodies every five to seven minutes; after 3pm we would get two or three bodies and severely wounded protesters every minute.” Other bodies were transported to the nearby Tawhid and Fath mosques.

Clashes between Morsi supporters and local residents also flared-up in the vicinity of al-Fath mosque, including in the Kolot Bek street and the area of Fagana. An eyewitness told Amnesty International that clashes started shortly after prayer, and that he saw Morsi supporters dragging a man they shot towards the Fath Mosque. Street fighting continued for hours with Morsi supporters setting a number of stores on Kolot Bek Street on fire.

By about 9pm, Morsi supporters were pushed back towards the Fath Mosque, as security reinforcements arrived. Protesters found themselves under siege by angry residents and security forces. Fighting continued intermittently with shooting reported from the top of the mosque, and firing of teargas inside by security. According to medical sources, Heba Abdelfatah died inside the mosque as a result of suffocation