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Egypt: State-sanctioned pattern of excessive use of force by security forces

Evidence gathered from eyewitnesses, health officials and wounded protesters suggests security forces used live ammunition to disperse crowds of mostly peaceful demonstrators on 6 October, said Amnesty International.

At least 49 people were killed and hundreds injured in Cairo alone, as security forces used excessive and unwarranted lethal force to disperse pro-Morsi protesters. According to eyewitnesses, in some instances, security forces stood by as men in civilian clothing armed with knives, swords or firearms attacked and clashed with demonstrators.

“The Egyptian security forces patently failed to prevent the loss of life. In a number of cases bystanders or non-violent protesters were caught up in the violence,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“Although some pro-Morsi protesters threw rocks, burned tyres and used fireworks or other incendiaries against security forces and local residents, the security forces – once again -resorted to the use of lethal force when it was not strictly necessary. Excessive use of force seems to have become the ‘normal’ modus operandi of Egyptian security forces.”

Under international law and standards, security forces should refrain from the use of firearms unless there is an imminent threat of death or serious injury.

Amnesty International is calling for a full, impartial and independent investigation into the events on 6 October.

No members of the security forces were killed during the violence.

Security forces fired tear gas and live rounds to stop two pro-Morsi marches heading towards Tahrir Square – the epicentre of the “25 January Revolution” - where pro-army rallies to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Egypt’s war with Israel were taking place.

In the bloodiest incident in the Al-Dokki district of Greater Cairo, 30 people were killed as security forces used teargas, shotguns and live ammunition against protesters attempting to reach and cross a bridge leading to Tahrir Square. Eyewitnesses said that armed men in civilian dress attacked demonstrators, in some cases stabbing them as security forces looked on. According to mortuary records 27 died as a result of live ammunition and three others as a result of shotgun pellet wounds the incident.

At Ibn Sina Hospital, Amnesty International representatives saw five dead bodies lying on the floor in the reception area hours after the clashes. A young man in blood-soaked clothes told the organization that he helped carry several injured protesters to the hospital in his arms.

Amnesty International also met at least five people who had been struck in the eye by shotgun pellets and could go blind or partially blind as a result. Among them was an unemployed father of two who got caught in the violence in Al-Dokki as he left a mosque nearby.

“When I got outside, it was chaos. There was lots of tear gas and [members of the Ministry of] Interior were shooting at protesters. Men dressed in civilian clothes were beside them... I was lost and trying to figure out where to run to, when I was shot in the head with shotgun pellets... There were no ambulances...a guy on a motorbike drove me to the hospital... I have no money for medical treatment how am I going to find work and feed my family now?” he said.

Other eyewitnesses present at the site of the clashes also described scenes of mayhem. One told Amnesty International:

“We came under a rain of shotgun pellets and live ammunition... We were then attacked by ‘thugs’ [men in civilian dress] ... Police, soldiers [from the armed forces] and ‘thugs’ were attacking us all at once...”

A number of protesters, including one who was shot in the stomach, said soldiers on foot had attacked the crowd from the side streets in an apparently coordinated attack.

Sixteen people were shot dead near Ramsis when security forces used live ammunition to disperse a pro-Morsi march aiming to reach Tahrir Square. Among those injured was a 16 year-old schoolboy who was shot in the arm and leg. “One bullet went straight through me and hit the man standing behind me,” he said.

Oum Sara [mother of Sara], a protester also on the scene said: “There was heavy teargas lingering in the air, and bullets whizzing by...People were running away, and security forces were chasing them...We ran with the crowd, people were falling around us.”

“The Egyptian security forces have an abysmal track record of using disproportionate force during protests. The authorities’ utter disregard for international standards on the lawful use of force suggests that they are prepared to crackdown on Morsi supporters at any cost,” said Hassiba Hadj Saharaoui.

At least 1,000 people were killed when security forces dispersed pro-Morsi sit-ins and other protests last August.

Ahead of 6 October, the Egyptian authorities warned that those protesting against the army on that day would pose a threat to national security and would not be considered activists.

“This effectively gave security forces a green light to commit abuses against protesters. The Egyptian authorities must ensure that its statements do not appear to sanction the excessive use of force to avoid further needless blood being spilled,” said Hassiba Hadj Saharaoui.

Hundreds were arrested during the violence or shortly afterwards. Amnesty International fears that some of those arrested were merely exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. All those arrested must either be charged with recognizably criminal offences or released. Some detainees were held in unofficial places of detention such as riot police camps. Many were denied access to their lawyers and families. Amnesty International calls on the Egyptian authorities to ensure all in custody are granted immediate access to lawyers, their relatives and any medical attention they require.