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Egypt's women must be allowed to protest in peace

Amnesty International called on Egypt's military rulers to uphold the right to peaceful demonstration as women human rights activists staged more protests today.

Activists took to the streets to denounce violence used by the military against female and opposition protesters in demonstrations over the past week that have left 17 people dead, most of them reportedly from gunfire.

"The shockingly violent scenes of recent days must not be repeated," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's interim Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Egypt's military authorities must ensure protesters are allowed to exercise their right to freedom of expression peacefully, without fear of attack. The authorities are responsible for the safety of those protesting."

Several women activists have spoken out in recent days about their brutal treatment by security forces, including beatings and threats of sexual abuse.

Women's rights groups staged fresh protests on in Cairo on Friday, sparking fears of renewed violence.

Egypt's military rulers, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), issued a statement saying armed forces and police would not interfere in Friday's protest.

However, other recent SCAF statements have attempted to depict activists as irresponsible and violent or trying to "plot to abolish the state".

One high-ranking military official even said that military forces were entitled to use live fire against protesters.

"Such statements represent instigation against protesters. Women human rights defenders and activists must be allowed to stand up against violations of human rights by the SCAF," said Philip Luther.

"The authorities must not use force against peaceful protesters and not target women with gender-based violence."

Violence first flared last Friday when military forces attacked a sit-in protest demanding the end of military rule.

On Tuesday, women marched through Cairo carrying shocking images of soldiers beating and stripping female demonstrators during previous protests.

Egypt's armed forces and riot police have a track record this year of violence against women, including

forced virginity tests against female protesters and sexual assault against female journalists.

On 16 December, soldiers were seen kicking and beating women protesters around Tahrir Square.

An online video clip showed two female protesters being dragged along the ground.

One of them had her clothes pulled off before a soldier stamped on her torso. The other, Azza Hilal, was beaten severely in the head and face. Other female protesters were dragged by their hair.

Armed forces took at least eight female protesters to a parliament building in central Cairo. They reportedly beat them with sticks and some were molested by soldiers or threatened with sexual assault. At least two was hospitalized.

Egypt's women activists speak out

Several women human rights defenders and activists have spoken out about their experiences during detention on 16 December (all video clips in Arabic):

Dr Farida al Hossy

Farida al Hossy was attacked as she was running from the field hospital in Tahrir Square. First a group of soldiers beat her with batons, then one of the soldiers continued beating and slapping her. She was detained along with other protesters, all injured and bleeding, in a parliament building before being released by an apologetic higher-ranking officer.

Dr Ghada Kamal - 28, pharmacist, member of the “6 April Youth” pro-democracy movement

Ghada Kamal says she was targeted for beatings because of an earlier encounter with masked army officers in Tahrir Square who threatened her with sexual assault. When she tried to help a girl who had been severely beaten in the square, she was hit on the head. She was recognized by a soldier who had seen her protesting earlier in the day - as a result she was taken inside the building for further punishment. She was also threatened with sexual assault during detention.

Mona Seif – member of the “No to Military Trial to Civilians” human rights group

Mona Seif was arrested while leaving the field hospital in Tahrir Square, where she had been hiding with a small boy. The soldiers took the boy from her and beat her. She was taken to a room where there was another child, several older women, a younger woman and a journalist. She says an officer identified the young woman as an activist, dragged her out and beat her. Officers and soldiers also removed the niqab from another woman and insulted her, while an older woman was slapped by several officers.