

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

WEB Q & A

AI index: MDE 01/001/2011
8 February 2011

Human rights and the unrest in the Middle East

What is Amnesty International doing about the protests in Egypt and elsewhere in the region?

We've sent a delegation to Egypt to help witness, record and expose human rights abuses being committed during the uprising, as we did during the unrest in Tunisia earlier in the year. We're doing this in close cooperation with local human rights activists, defenders and NGOs, most of whom we have worked with over many years to address human rights violations and campaign for reform.

We are mobilizing the 3 million activists, supporters and members who make up the global Amnesty International movement to put pressure on the Egyptian and other governments to respect all of the rights of their citizens – whether it is the right to speak freely and to peacefully protest without fear of being jailed or attacked, or the right not to be tortured, or the right not to suffer sexism or racism, or the right of everyone, including slum-dwellers, not to be evicted and left homeless.

These activists organize mass events, publicize human rights crimes and help bombard state officials with messages on behalf of men, women and children at risk of abuse.

They put pressure on regional and international bodies to take action and provide training and material so that people are aware of their human rights and better equipped to defend them. And they lobby and campaign for their own governments to exert what pressure and influence they can directly on the Egyptian government to end violations and to respect the right of Egyptians to peacefully protest and to deliver in practice on their other human rights obligations.

Amnesty International is regularly publishing material to hold the Egyptian and other governments to account for their appalling human rights records, and recommending steps needed to address violations and providing plans of action for implementing them.

We are also working with other groups in Egypt and elsewhere to promote human rights, help protect the many brave activists on the ground, and give a voice to those who are rarely heard.

Among other actions, we are urging those governments that have a history of supplying military and security assistance to Egypt - weapons, ammunition, equipment, training - to make clear to the Egyptian government that they will impose an immediate embargo if there is any question of the Egyptian army using force to suppress the peaceful protests or if the police and other security forces continue to use excessive force, including lethal force, against peaceful demonstrators or people they arrest or detain.

What is the human rights situation in Egypt?

The protests in Egypt erupted in the context of more than 30 years of severe repression and widespread human rights violations – most committed with impunity.

The government has crushed previous calls for reform using powers under a state of emergency that has been in force continuously for 30 years – the entire period of President Mubarak's rule.

Critics have been rounded up, prosecuted on trumped-up charges, and imprisoned after grossly unfair trials.

Tens of thousands of people labelled as a threat to security have been held without charge under repeated administrative detention orders, some for years. Some detainees have been systematically tortured.

About 16 million Egyptians – around one-in-five – live below the poverty line, many in sprawling slums, denied their basic social and economic rights.

The protesters across Egypt are now demanding their long-overdue human rights, they are demanding to be allowed to live in dignity and with social justice.

During the current uprising, the state has failed to protect protesters from violent attacks by police and pro-government supporters, imposed draconian restrictions on freedom of expression and rounded up, detained and allowed attacks on human rights workers and journalists.

What is Amnesty International calling for in Egypt?

Amnesty international is urging the authorities to:

- protect the right to peaceful protest
- stop the violence unleashed by pro-government supporters
- unconditionally release all human rights activists
- protect journalists and human rights activists trying to carry out their work.

Amnesty International is also calling on other states to put pressure on the Egyptian authorities to stop the violence and uphold human rights, including calls to:

- end the state of emergency and the repeal all provisions of the Emergency Law
- end the use of unnecessary, excessive or disproportionate force by the security forces
- stop the arbitrary arrest, torture or other ill-treatment of peaceful protesters
- respect freedom of expression, association and assembly
- investigate all allegations of torture or other ill-treatment and bring to justice the officials responsible
- investigate circumstances where security forces are reported to have used excessive force against demonstrators and bring the perpetrators to justice

What is Amnesty International's human rights agenda for Egypt, Tunisia and other repressive states in the region?

We demand that all states break with decades of repression by introducing urgent reforms – reforms of laws, institutions, systems and practices - to guarantee respect for human rights.

The security apparatus and the justice system, the main tools used to crush dissent and silence critics, must be overhauled.

Emergency and other repressive laws that allow human rights abuses should be abolished.

- The authorities should ensure that no member of the security apparatus is allowed to act above the law. They should rein in their agents and insist that the use of force adheres to international law and standards.

- The authorities should unequivocally condemn torture and other ill-treatment and ensure that these violations cease. They should abolish incommunicado detention and ensure that all allegations of torture are investigated.
- The authorities should uphold freedom of expression, association and assembly. New curbs on freedom of expression have been imposed and online social media, a vital organization tool for activists, closed down. Journalists, human rights defenders and opponents of the government must be able to pursue their legitimate goals free from harassment, intimidation and violence. All prisoners of conscience should be freed.
- The justice system in these countries should be reformed, to ensure that the judiciary is fully independent from the executive, to guarantee fair trials and to commute all death sentences and abolish the death penalty.
- The authorities should end impunity for human rights violations. They should begin by acknowledging the true scale and severity of the human rights violations that have taken place and then take steps to reverse this legacy.
- The authorities should fight discrimination in all its forms and uphold the rights of women and girls and of ethnic, religious and other minorities, including people targeted on account of their sexual identity.

Why does Amnesty International always call for perpetrators of human rights abuses to be held to account?

Victims of human rights violations and their families have a right to justice. They have a right to know what happened and to reparation and redress.

Experience all over the world shows that it is crucial for survivors and the families of victims to know the truth - there are devastating consequences for them when those in power suppress, conceal or deny them this right.

When crimes are committed and there is no investigation, prosecution or punishment, then those crimes are all too likely to be repeated.

By failing to take action, the authorities send a message that the torturers, killers and others can plan and commit human rights violations without fear of being brought to justice.

Under the umbrella of Egypt's decades-long state of emergency, abuses by the security forces have been routine and rarely punished. This has bred contempt for human rights among the security forces and promoted continuing violence.