

AI Index: PRE 01/396/2009
17 November 2009

Egypt: Cairo's poorest risk being buried alive in their homes

The Egyptian authorities must take immediate and inclusive steps to protect Cairo's poorest inhabitants living in 'unsafe areas' where they are at risk from rockslides and other dangers, Amnesty International said in a new report released today. "Thousands of Egypt's poor are trapped by poverty and neglect that could ultimately end in their deaths," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa director. "The government must urgently address the risks faced by those living in areas designated as 'unsafe' and find solutions by consulting with those directly affected." Amnesty International's report, *Buried Alive; Trapped by Poverty and Neglect in Cairo's Informal Settlements*, castigates the Egyptian authorities for failing to take effective steps to protect the residents of Al-Duwayqa, an informal settlement in Manshiyet Nasser in east Cairo, from the fatal rockslide that hit on 6 September 2008. The report calls on the Egyptian authorities to alleviate the threats to lives in the 26 "unsafe areas" in Greater Cairo, and to protect the residents' rights to health and adequate housing. Even though the risk of rockslide was well known, the government did not evacuate the impoverished residents before the 2008 disaster. The authorities say 107 people were killed and 58 injured in the Al-Duwayqa rockslide, but survivors say the toll of casualties was higher and report that many family members are still missing. An official investigation into the rockslide disaster has yet to produce any findings. "Denied an effective voice and largely ignored by those in power, many residents of Al-Duwayqa, and other 'unsafe areas' continue to live in fear on precarious hillsides or under high voltage power lines because they have nowhere else to go." Amnesty International is calling on the Egyptian authorities to investigate thoroughly the reasons why the Al-Duwayqa tragedy was not averted and to take the necessary steps to ensure that there can be no repetition. "The government must develop a comprehensive programme of action to address the risks faced by those living in 'unsafe areas' and to uphold their rights to life, health and adequate housing", said Malcolm Smart. "In doing so, they must seek the active participation of the affected communities, and they must be prepared to provide temporary housing promptly to people needing to be evacuated because of immediate risks, as well as permanent housing." After the rockslide, the Egyptian authorities moved quickly to identify other danger areas nearby. They demolished more than one thousand threatened homes and, within a month, re-housed more than 1,750 families - though without giving them legal tenure and leaving them liable to future eviction. Other families were left homeless and the allocation of housing discriminated against women who were divorced or living apart from their husbands. Some families were forcibly evicted from Al-Duwayqa and others from Establ Antar, an informal settlement in south Cairo. These evictions were mostly carried out in breach of procedural protections required under international human rights law, often with little warning and backed up by the presence of security forces. Families from Establ Antar were relocated to a remote area in 6 October City, west of Giza, far from their places of work and were given no legal security of tenure. "Slum dwellers describe a life characterized by deprivation, neglect, insecurity and the constant threat of forcible eviction," said Malcolm Smart. "The state must guarantee their right to adequate housing and put an end to forced evictions." 26 areas in Greater Cairo have been identified as 'unsafe' by a government master plan to develop the city by 2050, but there appears to have been little or no consultation with the communities that will be affected. Residents of 'unsafe areas' face a double threat: lack of safety and possible forced eviction. "The tragedy in Al-Duwayqa was a disaster waiting to happen. And that was well known," said Malcolm Smart. "More could - more should - have been done to avert it and to prevent the loss of life." "The Egyptian authorities owe it to both the victims and those who survived that awful morning, just as they owe it others at risk, to ensure that there is no repetition and that the tragedy of Al-Duwayqa is not played out again in any of Cairo's other 'unsafe areas'. Egypt's poor should not have to live any longer with the threat of being buried alive." Over a billion people throughout the world live in slums, and this number is increasing. As part of its Demand Dignity campaign, launched in May this year, Amnesty International is calling for governments globally to

provide adequate housing for its residents. Amnesty International's Demand Dignity campaign aims to end the human rights violations that drive and deepen global poverty. The campaign is mobilizing people all over the world to demand that governments, corporations and others who have power, listen to the voices of those living in poverty and recognise and protect their rights. ENDS/ **Notes to Editors:** • About half of Greater Cairo's estimated 13.5 million urban population live in informal settlements built either on agriculture or desert land. Manshiyet Nasser is said to be one of the biggest informal settlements in Egypt. It is mainly built on the slopes of Al-Muqattam hill in east Cairo, which is desert land owned by the state where local authorities can order evictions administratively. Manshiyet Nasser is home to around a million people. They mostly work in the informal sector as artisans, vendors, construction workers, rubbish collectors or as daily wage labourers. • A forced eviction is the removal of people against their will from the homes or land they occupy without legal protection and other safeguards. Evictions should not be carried out until all other feasible alternatives have been explored, genuine consultation has taken place with the affected communities and appropriate procedural protections are in place. • For more information on the Demand Dignity campaign visit <http://demanddignity.amnesty.org/campaigns-en/>