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ALGERIA: THE HIDDEN HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS.

BRUSSELS – Growing numbers of civilians have died or “disappeared” in Algeria in recent years where killings, torture and abductions are committed in the name of the “anti-terrorist fight” by some or “holy war” by others, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

“There is an atmosphere of terror and lawlessness in Algeria, where security forces commit extrajudicial executions, torture and “disappearances”, armed opposition groups kill civilians, often decapitating and mutilating their victims, and government-backed militias have taken the law into their own hands,” said Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

Much of the horror which haunts the Algerian population is hidden behind a wall of silence, as the government censors information considered to be security-related, and masked by the indifference of the international community. In its report, based on detailed information gathered from a wide range of sources, including eyewitnesses victims, lawyers, doctors, and army and security forces personnel, Amnesty International – the only international human rights organization which has continued to visit Algeria in recent years – discloses the hidden reality.

“Despite repeated claims by the authorities that human rights are respected and that the security situation has improved, the fact that the pattern of abuses continues shows that for both security forces and armed opposition groups human rights abuses are an integral part of their strategy,” Mr Sané said.

Amnesty International calls on all armed opposition groups to put an end to their murderous campaign against civilians and on the Algerian authorities to investigate human rights abuses, lift the impunity enjoyed by security forces, and disband the government-backed militias, as a first step to putting an end to the mass violations.

More than 50,000 people are reported to have been killed in the past five years. The identity and motives of those responsible for murders and other atrocities have become increasingly difficult to establish. Security forces often wear plain clothes and do not identify themselves, while armed opposition groups at times wear uniforms and pose as security forces. The proliferation and fragmentation of armed opposition groups, and government-backed militias has further added to the confusion.

“Just citing the numbers of those who have lost their lives can never convey the horror of the suffering of each individual, of each bereaved family,” Mr Sané said.

The victims come from all walks of life: women, children, civil servants, teachers, journalists, religious figures, political activists as well as relatives of members of security forces, government-backed militias and armed opposition groups. Many were killed in their homes in front of their families, some after having been abducted, and others were victims of indiscriminate attacks. As the circle of abuses by both government forces and armed opposition has continued to widen, civilians are increasingly trapped in the spiral of violence.

Extrajudicial executions by security forces are widespread and appear to be used as an alternative to arrest, to eliminate suspects, to take revenge for killings of security forces by armed opposition groups, or to intimidate those who may support armed groups. Detainees have been killed during secret detention, weeks or months after their arrest. These victims are sometimes described by the authorities as “terrorists” killed during armed confrontations, or as victims of “terrorist attacks”.

Government-backed militias, defined as “self-defence groups” or “patriots”, have committed deliberate and arbitrary killings with impunity. These militias, reportedly set up to defend their villages against armed opposition groups, are increasingly involved in “anti-terrorist” operations, acting outside the framework of law-enforcement and accountability. Allowing these militias to take the law into their own hands has further eroded and undermined the rule of law.

Armed opposition groups who define themselves as “Islamic groups” have continued to kill civilians, both in targeted and indiscriminate attacks. Many of their victims have had their throats cut, or were decapitated or mutilated, at times in front of their children and other relatives.

“Such atrocities have created an atmosphere of terror, where people fear not just being killed, but being killed in particularly brutal ways,” Mr Sané said.

Furthermore, these groups have increasingly targeted wives and relatives of members of the security forces and have also been responsible for abducting and raping women.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the “disappearances” of hundreds of people arrested by security forces. Some were reportedly seen in secret detention weeks or months after arrest and their families continue to search for them. “All they want to know is if their loved ones are dead or alive and where they are, but the authorities deny all knowledge of them,” Mr Sané said.

The practice of torture has become widespread, especially during secret detention in police and *gendarmerie* stations, military security centres and other places of detention. The aim is mainly to extract confessions, but torture is also used to punish detainees outside the context of interrogation.

No investigations are known to have been carried out into abuses such as extrajudicial executions, torture and “disappearances” and members of the security forces have not been brought to justice for such crimes.

“Victims and their families are therefore left feeling that they have no recourse for seeking justice,” Mr Sané said.

While the Algerian authorities have the right and the duty to bring to justice those responsible for killings and other atrocities, no level of violence by armed groups – no matter how serious – can ever justify the crimes committed by the security forces.

Amnesty International condemns in the strongest terms the murders and other heinous abuses committed by armed opposition groups against civilians, and calls on these groups to put an end to their campaign of terror. At the same time, the crimes committed by the security forces and government-backed militias cannot be allowed to continue unpunished.

“Urgent measures must be taken by the authorities to investigate these crimes and bring to justice those responsible, so as to end impunity and restore the rule of law,” Mr Sané said.

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