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Human Rights Have No Borders

Every state has the responsibility for protecting its civilians and ensuring their security. This principle is one of the fundamental reasons for the existence of the state -- a rule that no state should break. Yet in the six years since the declaration of the state of emergency in Algeria, the situation continues to deteriorate at an alarming rate. The massacres of civilians -- many of them women, children and the elderly -- in recent months has taken place on an almost daily basis, on a terrifying scale.

Not just one family is attacked -- hundreds of people are massacred. Victims are not just shot dead -- they have their throats cut, or are decapitated and mutilated. Civilians are not simply ambushed in isolated hamlets or on little travelled roads during the night -- the carnage takes place in military towns, sometimes within metres of army barracks. This year some massacres resulted in the death of more than 100 civilians: on 26 August there were some 100 victims in Beni Ali (Blida); on 29 August the massacre of at Sidi Rais (Sidi Moussa) claimed up to 300 victims; on 22 September more than 200 people were savagely killed in Bentalha (Baraki).

With no chance of outsiders getting free access to the "scene of the crime", and faced with fierce censorship imposed by the Algerian authorities, these numbers could even be higher and are simply an indication of the gravity of the situation.

Who are the killers? Why are defenceless civilians being targeted? Why don't the security forces and the army step in to protect women, children and the elderly when the killings go on for hours within earshot of military barracks? How is it possible that after hours of massacres the attackers can walk away from these bloody scenes with impunity/without being arrested by the security forces stationed nearby?

These disturbing questions remain unanswered and unexplained by the Algerian authorities, who more often than not prefer to boldly deny that massacres took place or minimize the number of victims. The official figures for the massacre at Sidi Rais are 98 dead, and for Bentalha 85 fatalities -- as if falsifying the figures will somehow diminish the scale of the tragedy.

To avoid responding to these disturbing questions, the Algerian authorities often hide behind the rhetoric of "national sovereignty" and "non-interference in internal affairs" -- the same authorities which welcome the international community's condemnation of "terrorism" with open arms.

The disturbing questions that Amnesty International poses are not about the country's political, economic or social issues. They are about the persistent violation of human rights which for six bloody years have bred a climate of impunity in Algeria.

Because human rights are not simply the internal affairs of any country in the world. No government has the right to abandon their citizens faced with horrible massacres or living under the threat of death by invoking pretexts of "sovereignty" or "non-interference". By ratifying international human rights treaties, the Algerian authorities have admitted that human rights have no borders, and have accepted that Algeria is not above international scrutiny.

Following the recent massacres -- carried out on such a scale and with such relentless brutality that the world was at last shocked -- the silence which for too long has surrounded events in Algeria has started to be broken. The international community -- through the words of the Secretary General of the United Nations, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNICEF and UNHCR -- has started to speak out against the lack of protection for the civilian population in Algeria.

However, the Algerian authorities obstinately refuse any suggestion that investigations into massacres and other abuses should be carried out, flatly condemning all such initiatives.

The first step to ending the infernal cycle of human rights violations in Algeria is to establish an independent and impartial inquiry to shed light on all these crimes and establish who is responsible for them. If the Algerian authorities have nothing to hide, they shouldn't oppose, but rather welcome any such initiative to protect the civilian population.

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