

AI Index: PRE 01/126/2012
09 March 2012

Egypt: A year after ‘virginity tests’, women victims of army violence still seek justice

The final session of the trial of an Egyptian military doctor accused of conducting forced “virginity tests” on Samira Ibrahim, a woman protester, will show if Egypt’s military courts are prepared to offer any redress for female victims of violence by the army, Amnesty International said today.

On Sunday, 11 March, a military court is expected to deliver a verdict in the case of the military doctor facing charges of “public indecency” and “disobeying military orders” for coercing women to undergo the invasive tests after they were arrested at a Cairo protest on 9 March, 2011. The initial charges faced by the doctor included rape but this charge has been dropped from the indictment.

In the year since then, violence against female protesters by the security forces has plagued public demonstrations in Egypt.

“Ever since this unacceptable episode, which is nothing less than torture, women protesters have repeatedly faced beatings, torture and other ill-treatment at the hands of Egypt’s army and security forces,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

“The ‘virginity tests’ trial is a rare opportunity for Egypt’s military to signal that torture by the army does not go unpunished and that perpetrators of human rights violations among its ranks will be held to account.”

“Yet this would only be an initial step. The military must fully respect a December 2011 administrative court decision which bans such ‘tests’ and the victims must be offered adequate reparation.”

‘Virginity tests’ targeting women

On 9 March 2011, when army officers violently cleared Tahrir square of protesters, they took at least 18 women into military detention.

Seventeen of those women were detained for four days. Some of them told Amnesty International that during that time male soldiers beat them, gave them electric shocks and subjected them to strip searches. They were then forced to undergo “virginity tests”, and threatened with prostitution charges.

Before they were released, the women were brought before a military court and received one-year suspended sentences for a variety of confected charges.

The case against the military doctor arose from two complaints filed by Samira Ibrahim, 25, one of the women who endured the ‘virginity tests’.

“Samira Ibrahim and all women who come forward to seek justice should be commended for their bravery, and the Egyptian authorities owe it to them to hold to account those responsible in fair and transparent trials,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

Ongoing violence against women protesters

Other women have filed recent complaints against Egypt’s Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) for violence targeting women at public demonstrations, including protests in December 2011 in front of the Cabinet building in Qasr El Einyy Street, where protesters were demanding an end to military rule and which left at least 17 people dead.

A video of military police dragging two women, one of whose clothes had been torn off, along the ground before severely beating and stamping on them was circulated on the internet, provoking widespread outrage.

One of the women in the video, 49-year-old Azza Hilal, told Amnesty International that soldiers beat her when she tried to help the veiled woman protester beaten by soldiers, not moving, and with her body exposed. Azza Hilal was repeatedly beaten with sticks on the head, arms, and back, causing her to bleed heavily and lose consciousness.

Following the assault, she was hospitalized for three weeks and still suffers from memory problems. An X-ray later showed her skull was fractured. Last month, she filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor’s Office against the SCAF for injuries she sustained.

Ghada Kamal, a 28-year-old pharmacist and member of the “6 April Youth” pro-reform movement, also told Amnesty International that she and other women were violently beaten and sexually harassed by the security forces on 16 December.

She believes she was targeted for beatings in the protests because of an earlier verbal argument with army officers in Tahrir Square, who according to her had threatened women protesters with sexual assault, making lewd gestures to women and unzipping their pants.

Later the same day, soldiers hit Ghada Kamal on the head when she came to the aid of another female protester who had been beaten violently.

She told Amnesty International that soldiers beat her with sticks and a whip-like object, and stamped on her with their boots. She said they also sexually harassed her while dragging her into the Parliament building.

While Ghada Kamal was detained, the beatings continued, and she said she saw seven other women being verbally and physically attacked. The soldiers intentionally targeted women’s private parts, and she was herself threatened by rape, she said.

“[The sexual harassment] was meant to terrorize them,” Ghada Kamal told Amnesty International. “Women would rather die but not be undressed, raped or sexually harassed. They were very clever, they knew what mattered to the women, it was the limit.”

Despite SCAF’s apologies and promises to investigate the numerous reports of violence against women by the army and security forces, the victims have told Amnesty International that little has been done to bring those responsible to justice, or to provide these women with reparation.

Amnesty International said that these forms of torture and ill-treatment exploits the stigma attached to sexual and gender-based violence, and are being used to stereotype and marginalize women protesters, in an attempt to deter these women, and other Egyptian women and girls, from participating in public life.

The organization called for thorough, impartial and independent investigations to be carried out into all

complaints by women who faced this kind of brutal assault and for those responsible to be brought to justice. Amnesty International said that the victims must be fully provided with full reparation, including compensation and guarantees of non-repetition, for the harm suffered.