

AI Index: PRE 01/317/2011
25 June 2011

Egypt: End military trials, scrap repressive laws

The Egyptian authorities must earn the trust of the people by abolishing repressive laws and ending abusive practices, the Secretary General of Amnesty International said today in Cairo.

Speaking after his week-long visit to Egypt, his first official trip to the Middle East and North Africa, Salil Shetty called on the Egyptian authorities, including the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to use the post-Mubarak transition period to carry out urgent reforms and lift new repressive steps such as the law banning strikes and the use of military trials against civilians.

“This is an incredible moment of opportunity for the Egyptian authorities to show they have made a clean break with past abuses,” said Salil Shetty. “And there have been some important encouraging steps, including the release of administrative detainees, the dissolution of the old State Security Investigation Services and the commitment for Egypt to become a party to the International Criminal Court.”

“As a statement of intent, the authorities should immediately scrap the Emergency Law and end the 30-year state of emergency. Its continued existence, combined with other new restrictive measures is creating an atmosphere of distrust which is likely to seriously affect preparations for elections.”

Amnesty International said that while SCAF had a responsibility to maintain law and order, they did not require this range of repressive powers to do so.

SCAF has said that at least 7000 civilians have been tried in military courts since Mubarak stepped down. Amnesty International considers such trials to violate fundamental requirements of due process and fair trials.

Shetty said that while he had been in Egypt he had learnt of several cases of people brought before military courts or summoned before the military prosecutor – for ‘offences’ such as criticising the military, going on strike and squatting.

In April the authorities passed a new law that criminalizes any strike that “prevents or delays or obstructs” state institutions from working.

Earlier this month a group of workers from the Ministry of Petroleum who were holding a sit-in were the first people to be brought to trial under the new law.

“The Egyptian authorities must listen to the legitimate demands of those who sacrificed so much for their dignity,” said Salil Shetty.

During his visit, Shetty met Government officials including the Minister of Interior Mansour Essawy and Deputy Foreign Minister Wafa Bassim. A meeting had been requested with SCAF.

In his meetings he sought details on the authorities’ strategy to eliminate torture.

“We welcome the announcement of a new panel to look into cases of torture. It is essential that it is able to investigate all cases of torture, including by the armed forces,” said Salil Shetty.

“An urgent priority should be to investigate and hold to account those responsible for the recent cases of forced virginity tests against female protesters.”

Shetty also raised with the authorities the cases of the victims of security forces’ brutality during protests, many of whom have been trying without success to hold accountable those responsible for the deaths of their spouses, children or siblings.

During his visit he met families of those killed during the “25 January revolution” in Cairo and Suez, some of whom yesterday held a protest at Maspero calling for justice and reparations from the authorities for the loss of loved ones.

Among other grievances, many families object to the fact that several of the police officers on trial for unlawfully killing protesters continue to carry out their duties as normal.

Amnesty International said more must be done for victims of serious injury, including payment of their medical costs. Government officials have said they are looking at how to help injured protesters, but to Amnesty International’s knowledge no action has yet been taken.

Shetty also visited Manshiyet Nasr informal settlement in Greater Cairo, meeting residents in “unsafe” areas, at risk from rock falls and forced eviction.

Residents of slums have told Amnesty International of their sense of powerlessness and neglect, of the past regime of torture and humiliation at the hands of local police, which drove them to join the uprising.

“The vast majority of the victims killed or injured during the “January 25 revolution” came from underprivileged backgrounds,” said Salil Shetty.

“Although Egypt may be in a transitional period, that cannot reduce the urgency of addressing the needs of those struggling to live in dignity or provide for their families.”

Background

Salil Shetty is expected to meet Deputy Prime Minister Yehia el-Gamal shortly before his departure tomorrow. He also called on the Secretary General of the League of Arab states Amr Mousa this morning. He met extensively with human rights organizations and activists.