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Algeria: Commitment on mass grave investigations needed from presidential candidates

At the start of the first official week of campaigning ahead of the presidential elections on 8 April, Amnesty International urges all candidates to commit to taking seriously discoveries of mass graves containing presumed victims of gross human rights abuses committed during the last decade.

"Urgent measures must be taken to ensure mass grave sites are protected wherever they are found," Amnesty International said. "No matter who is responsible for killing the people whose remains are buried at the sites, the authorities need to ensure that the evidence found is not then destroyed."

Amnesty International's call follows recent shocking reports that the remains of dozens of people were last month exhumed from a mass grave site in the western province of Relizane and transferred elsewhere in an apparent attempt to conceal or destroy evidence of human rights abuses. The remains are believed to be of civilians abducted and killed by a local state-armed militia in the mid-1990s.

This is not the first time such reports have emerged. In 2000 human rights campaigners in Algeria alleged that the remains of some 20 people buried at another mass grave site in the same area were exhumed and relocated by members of the same militia in order to cover up their crimes.

"The body parts found in mass grave sites constitute, not only vital evidence for investigations which still must be carried out into what amount to crimes against humanity committed in Algeria during the last decade, but also the remains of victims whose relatives should be given the long-awaited chance to bury them in a dignified fashion," Amnesty International said.

In recent years, Amnesty International has repeatedly called for a full, independent and impartial commission of inquiry into the gross human rights abuses perpetrated in Algeria since 1992 by armed groups, the security forces and state-armed militias.

Since 1998 the Algerian press has reported the discovery of around a dozen mass grave sites, many of them in areas which were particularly severely affected by violence during the mid-1990s. Newspaper reports suggested that the remains of up to scores of people appeared to be contained in each.

The way in which the authorities have dealt with these mass graves has generated considerable fears and anxieties. Aside from failing to prevent suspected cover-ups, the authorities do not appear to have investigated mass grave sites in line with internationally accepted standards, reportedly resulting in the destruction of some or all of the available evidence.

The fears and anxieties are felt particularly acutely by the families of the thousands of people who have been abducted by armed groups during the last decade and are presumed to have been assassinated by them, but whose bodies have never been found. These families believe that the remains of their relatives may lie in a mass grave and hope that sooner rather than later those remains might be exhumed and identified, allowing them to lay their relatives to rest with dignity.

Associations of families of the "disappeared" are also deeply concerned, as they believe that some sites may contain bodies of civilians who "disappeared" after arrest by the security forces or state-armed militias during the 1990s.

The way mass grave sites have been dealt with epitomizes the ongoing failure of the Algerian authorities to concretely address the legacy of a decade of violence, in which over 100,000 people have been killed and thousands more have "disappeared". To date there has been almost no movement towards establishing the truth surrounding these abuses and bringing those responsible to justice, leaving victims and their families without redress and the population without guarantees that the crimes against humanity they have witnessed in recent years will not be repeated.

Background

The latest discovery of a mass grave in the province of Relizane was announced at a press conference in Algiers on 27 December 2003 by human rights defender Mohamed Smaïn. He explained that he had been alerted to the site by people living in the area who had discovered human remains and items of clothing there.

Two items found at the site, a pair of waterproof trousers and a cigarette lighter, were identified by a local family as belonging to their "disappeared" relative, Abed Saidane. The family said that Abed Saidane, a 48-year-old shopkeeper and father of seven, was wearing the trousers when he was abducted in front of several relatives by members of a local state-armed militia on 9 September 1996. Local militias are alleged to be responsible for the "disappearance" of over 200 civilians in the area in the mid-1990s.

Mohamed Smaïn, head of the local branch of the *Ligue algérienne pour la défense des droits de l'homme* (LADDH), Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights, has repeatedly denounced the local state-armed militias he believes are responsible for the crimes. His campaigning work led to a court case being launched against him in 2001 by the militiamen he was denouncing. He was convicted of defaming them in January 2002 and sentenced, on appeal, to one year's imprisonment, a fine of 5,000 dinars (approximately US\$65) and total damages of 270,000 dinars (US\$3,500). He is currently at liberty, pending a decision by the Supreme Court on the case. If imprisoned, Amnesty International would consider him a prisoner of conscience.

Amnesty International calls on governments, when conducting investigations of mass grave sites, to follow methods set out in agreed international standards, such as the UN Model Protocol for Disinterment and Analysis of Skeletal Remains.

For more information, see Amnesty International's most recent report *Algeria: Steps towards change or empty promises?* (AI Index: MDE 28/005/2003) of 16 September 2003.

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