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Egypt: Investigate attacks on women protesters

The Egyptian authorities must immediately launch an investigation into reports of sexual harassment and assaults against women protesters during a demonstration in Cairo, Amnesty International said today.

A group of activists calling for an end to sexual harassment of women protesters were reportedly groped and punched by a mob of men as they marched across Tahrir Square on Friday.

The assault comes amid increasing reports of sexual harassment against women protesters in Egypt.

“These women stood up to demand an end to sexual harassment. What they got was intimidation and sexual assault,” said Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa, Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

“In last year’s protests, Tahrir Square was a place where women stood on an equal footing with men to demand their freedom. Now it has become a place where women are singled out for sexual harassment.

“These attacks need to be investigated immediately and those found responsible held to account. An investigation would serve as a deterrent against sexual harassment and will help protect women protesters who are exercising their right to peacefully express their views.”

Activists told Amnesty International that a group of men tried to tear off the women protesters’ clothes and steal their belongings. The women and male supporters fought back but the attackers persisted.

The protest had started peacefully but became violent after several women were attacked, in spite of a circle that the men had formed around them to try and shield them.

“There were hands groping us and stealing our belongings from our bags and pockets. It was chaos, we couldn’t tell who was with us and who was against us,” said Lobna Darwish, one of the organizers of the protest and a member of Mosireen (‘Determined’), an Egyptian collective of filmmakers and citizen journalists.

Male supporters told Amnesty International they were also groped as they tried to help the women and they felt hands reaching into their pockets to steal their belongings during the scuffles.

The women were eventually able to run to safety or find refuge in nearby buildings until the situation quieted down.

The attack on the women protesters comes after reports of harassment and assault by large groups of men earlier in the week.

Nihal Saad Zaghloul told Amnesty International that she and three friends were attacked by a large group of men on 2 June in Tahrir Square as they joined a protest after the verdict in Hosni Mubarak’s trial. She

was pushed and groped and her headscarf pulled off before she was rescued by some men in the square.

Her two female friends were also attacked and groped by the men who also tried to tear their clothes off while a male friend was badly beaten as he tried to help them.

Women in Egypt have increasingly become the target of attacks from mobs of men, who have gone unpunished, and from the security forces.

In December 2011, women protesters were beaten by soldiers who kicked them and dragged them through the streets. Armed forces took at least eight female protesters to a parliament building in central Cairo. They reportedly beat them with sticks and some were molested by soldiers or threatened with sexual assault.

Women who were arrested when armed forces forcibly dispersed a protest against military rule in May 2012 were reportedly beaten and sexually harassed.

"Whether the attacks are committed by unidentified mobs or by the security forces themselves, it is equally damaging for women and their human rights," said Sahroui.

Last year, attacks on female foreign journalists highlighted the issue.

On 11 February 2011, CBS journalist Lara Logan was beaten and sexually assaulted by a mob of men in Tahrir Square.

On 24 November 2011, France 3 reporter Caroline Sinz was assaulted in a street near Tahrir Square.

Using sexual harassment and assault against women protesters is a tactic that was frequently used under former president Hosni Mubarak.

In 2005, thugs were reportedly hired to attack women journalists taking part in a protest calling for the boycott of the referendum on constitutional reform.

"Women must be free to exercise their rights of freedom of expression and assembly in full equality," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

"These forms of sexual harassment, sexual assault and other forms of ill-treatment against women protesters are an attempt to intimidate them and prevent them from participating fully in public life.

"The authorities have so far done nothing to investigate these attacks. The impunity so far enjoyed by those attacking women protesters seems to have encouraged the trend of sexual harassment and assault to continue.

"The epidemic of sexual harassment in Egypt will only stop if the authorities, and society at large, confront the men who act as if women are commodities. The prevailing climate of impunity must stop by bringing perpetrators to justice."