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Algeria: No more promises but deeds

After years of talk about improving the human rights situation in the country by the Algerian authorities, translating promises of change into reality has never been more urgent, Amnesty International said in a report published today.

"It is high time the Algerian authorities started implementing their promises of change and tackled human rights abuses effectively," Amnesty International said.

The report *Algeria: Steps towards change or empty promises?* examines the impact of initiatives planned or implemented by the Algerian authorities in the last three years. It argues that a repeated failure by the state to turn promises into action has resulted in a lack of confidence in the authorities' stated commitment to improving the human rights situation.

"To regain the confidence of ordinary Algerians, the authorities must show they are serious about tackling the population's pressing human rights concerns," Amnesty International said.

The human rights situation in the country, although improved since the mid to late 1990s, remains of serious concern. Up to 100 people continue to be killed each month by armed groups, the security forces and state-armed militias, with civilians bearing the brunt of the violence in indiscriminate bomb explosions or targeted armed attacks.

Torture in state custody remains widespread and is systematic in cases linked to what the authorities describe as "terrorist" activities. The vast majority of such cases are reported in military compounds run by Military Security, the most secretive and unaccountable of Algeria's security services.

The Algerian authorities have been talking increasingly in recent years about change, pointing to a series of reforms being planned and gradually implemented in areas such as legislation and the structure of state institutions. Some initiatives over the last three years have contained positive elements. Legislative changes in 2001, for instance, should in theory have improved safeguards protecting detainees from torture and secret detention. Like previous safeguards in the law, however, they have remained largely dead-letter.

Amnesty International is gravely concerned at other measures recently adopted by the Algerian government. The January 2000 amnesty of around 1,000 armed group members and the subsequent

extra-legal application of clemency measures for armed groups, for instance, have prevented the truth from emerging about grave human rights abuses and ensured impunity for the perpetrators, thus depriving tens of thousands of victims of their right to redress.

The report emphasizes, however, that none of the initiatives have addressed the legacy of the past decade, in which Algeria had been ravaged by a human rights crisis of horrendous proportions. No full, independent and impartial investigations have taken place into the massive human rights abuses committed since 1992, which amount to crimes against humanity.

These crimes include tens of thousands of killings and thousands of cases of torture committed by armed groups, the security forces and state-armed militias. They also include thousands of cases of people who "disappeared" following arrest by the security forces or state-armed militias. The Algerian authorities, moreover, continue to deny that state agents have been responsible for widespread patterns of human rights violations in the last decade.

Amnesty International reiterated its call on all armed groups to stop targeting civilians and respect the most fundamental human right, the right to life. The organization also urged these groups to immediately stop the practice of abducting women and girls and subjecting them to rape and other forms of torture.

"The victims of these abuses have waited too long already. It is high time that their voices are heard and the promise of change gives way to action."

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