

PUBLIC

AI Index: MDE 12/27/99
Distrib: PG/SC

To: Medical professionals
From: Medical Office / Middle East Program
Date: 8 July 1999

Further information on
MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION
Prison conditions and deaths in custody
EGYPT

[also see: AI Index MDE 12/46/98, 24 September 1998]

Theme: prison conditions / ill-health / access to medical care / response from the authorities

Summary

In September 1998, Amnesty International issued a medical letter writing action expressing concern at reports that at least 14 prisoners had died in custody in Egypt since early 1997. The organization named several prisoners who died suffering from tuberculosis or liver problems and who reportedly were denied adequate medical care in detention after they fell ill.

In a reply to an appeal sent by a member of the Swiss health professional network, the Egyptian Minister of Health and Population stated that "all the prisons in the Arab Republic of Egypt ... enjoy good health care" and that "the prisoners are visited by their families, lawyers and physicians".

Amnesty International has reliable information that these statements by the Minister of Health and Population are not correct. Former prisoners have told the organization that often no qualified medical staff are available in Egyptian prisons and that medically qualified prisoners try to provide care to fellow inmates to help meet the need. Provisions in Egyptian law permitting the banning of prison visits are vague and give the authorities complete discretion in deciding whether to prohibit access. Bans have repeatedly been imposed by the Ministry of the Interior on whole prisons, denying prisoners access to their families, lawyers and physicians and thereby violating their basic rights.

Background

Prisoners in Egypt are often detained in cramped and unhygienic conditions and the food provided is inadequate and of poor quality. Diseases spread rapidly throughout prisons, the most commonly reported diseases including TB, skin diseases and stomach problems. Many prisons have no medical personnel on site and sick detainees only receive basic medication provided by doctors visiting the prisons. This lack of adequate medical care is in direct contravention of both international human rights standards and national legislation.

Recommended Actions

Groups and network members who have already written on the original medical action are requested to send follow-up letters in their professional capacity. Please note that the Swiss AI member who has received the Minister's reply had not identified herself as an AI member in her letter to him. It is more likely that you will receive a response if you do not make any mention of Amnesty International in your correspondence.

Letters could

- o refer to your earlier letters to the Minister and/or other Egyptian authorities;
- o explain that you have learned of the Minister's reply to a colleague of yours who had written to him expressing concern at the reported lack of adequate medical care and the deaths in custody of at least 14 prisoners in Egypt since early 1997
- o note that, contrary to the statements made by the Minister of Health in his letter, detainees in several Egyptian prisons are being banned from seeing their lawyers or family members [you could name the High Security Prison in Tora (since November 1993, Istiqbal Tora Prison (since February 1995) and al-Fayoum Prison (since October 1996)]
- o note that Amnesty International has received reliable reports that often no qualified medical personnel are available in Egyptian prisons, and that medically qualified detainees try to look after their fellow inmates to help meet the need
- o note that the UN Body of Principles for the Protection of all Persons Under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment calls upon authorities to provide prisoners with medical care and treatment whenever necessary and to keep records of all medical examinations [Principles 24 and 26]; and that the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners provide for a qualified medical officer to be available at every prison, and for sick prisoners to be transferred to hospital or a specialized institution if they are in need of specialist care [Principle 22]
- o invite a response

If you receive no reply from the government or other recipients within two months of dispatch of your letter, please send a follow-up letter seeking a response. Please send copies of any replies you do receive to the International Secretariat [attn: medical team] and check with your national coordinator or the medical team if you send appeals after 30 September 1999.

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Please also send copies of your letters to diplomatic representatives of Egypt in your country or to the nearest Egyptian embassy.