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Public Statement

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Egypt: Continuing crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood

Amnesty International is greatly concerned by the recent arrests, detention and prosecution on terrorism-related charges of leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood, apparently because of their peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of association and assembly. The renewed crackdown coincides with the trial of 40 other Muslim Brotherhood members - all of whom, although they are civilians, are being tried before a military court where proceedings are notoriously unfair. One of the defendants, Khayrat El Shater, suffers from serious health conditions and Amnesty International is urging the Egyptian authorities to ensure that he receives the medical care he urgently need.

Rajab Abu Zeid and Sabri Amer, two members of the People's Assembly, the lower chamber of the Egyptian parliament, were arrested on 22 August at their homes. Their parliamentary immunity had been lifted, with their consent, after the Minister of Justice ruled in May 2007 that criminal proceedings should be opened against them when they were previously arrested with other Muslim Brothers. The two parliamentarians were granted bail by the Supreme State Security Prosecution on 23 August and released from custody but they now face trial on charges under the 1992 law on terrorism for participating in a meeting in April 2007 in Menoufia Governorate, held to prepare for elections to the upper chamber of parliament, the Shura Council.

Earlier, on 17 August, the authorities arrested 18 other leading Muslim Brothers, one of whom Essam al-Aryan, was next day remanded in custody by the Supreme State Security Prosecution on the same charges subsequently brought against the two parliamentarians. The day before his arrest, security officers at Cairo Airport had prevented him from travelling to Turkey as a member of the Doctors' Syndicate. He has previously been imprisoned several times for his non-violent activities as a member the Muslim Brotherhood, having been sentenced to five years in prison after an unfair trial before a military court in 1995 and detained without charge or trial for eight months in 2006.

These arrests are the latest in a long-standing pattern of repression by the Egyptian authorities against the Muslim Brotherhood, which is commonly stepped-up at the time of elections. More than 500 members are believed currently to be detained, many of them without charge or trial. Although the organization is officially banned, it is recognized to be the largest organized opposition group in Egypt and 88 of its members were elected to the People's Assembly in 2005 as independents.

Forty other Muslim Brothers, including leaders of the organization, are currently being tried before the Supreme Military Court on charges of terrorism and money-laundering. They were sent for trial by the military court by order of President Mubarak, although they are all civilians. Seventeen of the 40 were previously acquitted of the same charges by a Cairo criminal court.

Khayrat El Shater, one of the defendants, is reported to be in urgent need of medical treatment for a serious leg infection complicated by diabetes, caused or exacerbated by overcrowding and poor prison conditions.

Amnesty International continues to urge the Egyptian authorities to release all those being held for their non-violent expression of their political beliefs, to cease trying civilians before military courts and to repeal laws criminalising peaceful exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Background

Amnesty International considers that military courts should not have jurisdiction to try civilians, whatever the charges they face. Trying civilians before military courts, whose judges are serving members of the military, flouts international standards of fair trial and is inherently unjust, regardless of whether the

defendants are allowed a right of appeal or not. The organization has criticized the military trial of the 40 members of the Muslim Brothers. It has attempted three times to send an international observer to the trial but on each occasion the observer was denied access to the military court.

Amnesty International has also criticized recent constitutional amendments, notably the amendment of article 179 to empower the president to interfere in the judiciary and by-pass the ordinary criminal courts, including by referring people suspected of terrorism-related offences to military courts.

For more information see:

Egypt: Amnesty International calls for President to allow observers at key military trial, 3 August 2007 (AI Index: MDE 12/024/2007)
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engMDE120242007?open&of=eng-2md>

Egypt: Justice subverted: trials of civilians before military courts, 2 August 2007, (AI Index: MDE 12/022/2007)
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE120222007>

Egypt: Referendum must not be used to legitimize erosion of human rights, 22 March 2007 (AI Index: MDE 12/009/2007)
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE120092007?open&of=ENG-2MD>