

Algeria: Stop destroying evidence

Amnesty International is concerned about shocking reports of attempts in Algeria to conceal or destroy evidence of human rights abuses. According to these reports, human remains were secretly exhumed in January this year from a mass grave site in the western province of Relizane. The site had been discovered in November 2003 by a local human rights activist who also collected evidence indicating that it contained the remains of civilians abducted and killed by local state-armed militias.

These militias are believed to be responsible for the “disappearance” of over 200 civilians in the province of Relizane in the mid-1990s. Algerian human rights campaigners allege that several other mass grave sites in the same area were exhumed and relocated in 2000, in order to cover up the militias’ crimes. They have also raised concerns that the authorities failed to prevent the cover-ups because the perpetrators of the crimes are believed to be militias armed by the state.

The body parts found in mass grave sites constitute vital evidence for investigations which must be carried out into the thousands of “disappearances” and other crimes against humanity committed in Algeria during the last decade. It is feared that some or all of the evidence contained in the mass graves in Relizane has now been destroyed.

Please write to the newly elected Algerian President, expressing concern about the destruction of evidence of human rights abuses committed by state-armed militias in the Relizane province. Urge him to make one of the first acts of his new term in office be the launching of a full and independent investigation into the recent destruction of evidence of human rights abuses in Sidi M’hamed Benaouda. You can base your letter on the following sample:

Sample letter

I am writing to you as the newly elected highest representative of the Algerian state. I would like to express my great concern about the apparent destruction of evidence of grave human rights abuses presumed to have been committed by state-armed militias in the Relizane province, western Algeria. I am particularly concerned that the state authorities failed to protect the mass grave where this evidence was found because it was presumed to contain the remains of people killed by state-armed militias in the mid-1990s.

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.

Please ensure that urgent measures are taken to protect mass grave sites wherever they are found. I also urge you to launch an immediate, full and independent investigation into the recent

destruction of what might be evidence of extrajudicial executions carried out by state-armed militias in the province of Relizane.

Mohamed Smain at the mass grave site of Sidi M'hamed Benaouda, holding up a pair of trousers he identified as having been worn by Abed Saidane (inset) on the day of his "disappearance". Human remains have since been secretly removed from the site.

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Hiding the truth – the story of Abed Saidane

Abed Saidane, aged 48 and a father of seven, was taken from outside his home on 9 September 1996 in front of several members of his family. His family recognized those who arrested him as a local chief of a state-armed militia, and several of his militia companions. Despite countless efforts by the family to find information concerning the fate and whereabouts of Abed Saidane, they remained without news since that day.

In November 2003, Mohamed Smain, a local human rights defender, was alerted to a suspected mass grave site by people living in the area of Sidi M'hamed Benaouda, who had discovered there human remains and items of clothing. Some of the items of clothing collected were identified as those worn by Abed Saidane on the day he was taken away by the militia, in particular a pair of green waterproof trousers with one button missing. A lighter he had been carrying on the night before his arrest was found in a pocket of his trousers, but his money and driving licence had vanished.

Following the discovery of their relative's remains, the family of Abed Saidane lodged a complaint at the local court of Oued Rhiou, Relizane province. Although the public prosecutor ordered an investigation, the gendarmerie failed to keep an appointment with Mohamed Smain on 11 January 2004 to accompany him to the mass grave site. On the following day he returned with the gendarmerie only to discover that all the bones and items of clothing had been removed from the site. The site has since been cordoned off and is guarded by communal guards. No investigation of either the site or the circumstances surrounding the removal of human remains is known to have been opened.

Related documents

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde280012004>

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde280052003>

<http://web.amnesty.org/web/wire.nsf/October2003/Algeria>