

Algeria: Truth and justice should not be obscured by Impunity

"A lasting peace in Algeria cannot be built by sacrificing truth and justice," Amnesty International said in its new report 'Truth and justice obscured by the shadow of impunity', released today.

"Only by establishing the truth about all the violations and abuses of the last decade, through full, independent and impartial investigations, and ensuring the accountability for all those responsible for past and current human rights abuses, can confidence in the justice system be restored."

Tens of thousands have died since the current conflict began in 1992, thousands have "disappeared" after being taken away by the security forces and hundreds of thousands have been injured in acts of violence or afflicted by the pain of losing a close relative. "The victims and their families have a legitimate desire and a right to truth and justice," Amnesty International said.

The Algerian authorities have talked of their intention to turn the page on this dark chapter. Yet they have failed to take any concrete and effective measures to tackle the huge problem of impunity in the country, or to carry out independent and impartial investigations into the killings and human rights abuses that took place in the last decade.

"The wounds caused by a tragedy of such scale and depth as that experienced by Algeria during the last decade cannot be healed by a 'turn the page and forget' approach," Amnesty International said.

At the end of October Amnesty International received a response from the Algerian authorities to a memorandum sent to them in August detailing the organization's concerns. In the response the authorities expressed their wish to further their dialogue with Amnesty International and other human rights organizations on matters of mutual concern and reiterated their commitment to strengthening human rights protection, notably through judicial reforms and legislative amendments. The authorities also emphasized that all cases of human rights abuses brought to their attention were investigated.

Amnesty International welcomed this response, but regretted that its requests for information concerning specific cases of abuses or details of the outcome of investigations remained unanswered.

An Amnesty International delegation is currently visiting Algeria (5 to 19 November), where it is meeting victims, families of victims, human rights activists and other members of civil society. The organization hopes that, in the course of continuing talks with government officials, its delegation will be provided with the detailed information it has requested.

A range of concerns arise from the provisions of the presidential amnesty as well as from the application of the Civil Harmony law in practice.

Amnesty International takes no position on the granting of pardons after the truth is known and the judicial process has been completed. However, the organization opposes amnesty laws or other mechanisms which prevent the emergence of the truth and accountability.

"It is a paradoxical situation whereby people who have already spent up to eight years in prison continue to serve prison sentences imposed in unfair trials, whereas people who spent years as leaders or active members of armed groups have been granted an amnesty or exempted from judicial prosecution in a matter of days after giving themselves up," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International shares the concerns of victims and families of victim in Algeria that their appeals for truth and justice have not been heeded.

The human rights organization calls on the Algerian government to:

- Investigate urgently the thousands of killings, massacres, "disappearances", abductions, cases of torture, and other grave abuses committed since 1992 by security forces, state-armed militias and armed groups which call themselves "Islamic groups", and ensure that all those responsible are brought to justice.
- Declare the wholesale amnesties, extended also to perpetrators of serious human rights abuses which constitute violations of international law, to be null and void.
- Ensure that members or leaders of armed groups who have surrendered under the Civil Harmony law and who have been responsible for human rights abuses are brought to justice.
- Take concrete measures to put an immediate end to arbitrary arrests, secret detentions, torture, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions.
- Disband all state-armed militias and ensure that law-enforcement tasks are carried out by adequately trained personnel operating in an official framework which ensures accountability.

Amnesty International reiterates its condemnation of the killings and other grave human rights abuses committed by armed groups and calls once again on these groups to stop targeting civilians.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web :
<http://www.amnesty.org>