

EGYPT:

Arrest and Detention Practices and Prison Conditions

Middle East Watch (MEW) conducted a fact-finding mission to Egypt in January and February 1992, to investigate arrest and detention practices and allegations of torture of individuals held in the custody of the security forces. Participating in the mission were Virginia N. Sherry, associate director of MEW, and John Valery White, an attorney and Orville Schell Fellow with Human Rights Watch.

On February 5, while the mission was in progress, MEW representatives were informed by the government that they would be able to visit and inspect Egyptian prisons, access MEW has sought since 1990. MEW accepted the invitation and, beginning on February 12, visited six prisons over an eight-day period.

These six facilities housed 9,778 inmates, over 27 percent of Egypt's total prison population. Five of the prisons are located just outside the Cairo metropolitan area: in Abu Zabel, northeast of the city; in Tora, southeast of Cairo on the Nile; and in Qanater, northwest of Cairo on the Nile. The sixth prison is in the city of Tanta, about 55 miles northwest of Cairo. MEW chose to visit Abu Zabel and Tora prisons because political prisoners -- some in long-term detention without charge -- are held there, and because each facility contains a high-security prison (Abu Zabel Liman and Tora Liman) for prisoners sentenced to hard labor. Qanater was selected because 1,100 of Egypt's 1,441 women detainees and sentenced prisoners are held there. MEW also sought to visit a general prison, and Tanta was selected for this reason.

While the prison visits were underway, Egyptian daily newspapers began to characterize MEW's observations and findings, often quoting Interior Minister Muhammed Abdel Halim Moussa, without contacting MEW representatives for comment. In order to publicly respond to misrepresentations that appeared in the Egyptian press, MEW held a press conference in Cairo on February 22, at the conclusion of the mission, to clarify the facts and release preliminary findings. The statement distributed by MEW at the press conference follows.

* * *

Middle East Watch, an independent human rights monitoring organization based in the United States, has called this press conference in response to misleading and inaccurate reports that have appeared in Egyptian daily newspapers about our observations during and conclusions following recent visits to Egyptian prisons. MEW representatives were not contacted for comment by *al-Ahram*, *al-Akhbar*, *al-Gomhuriyya* and *al-Wafd* prior to the publication of stories by these newspapers characterizing our impressions and conclusions from these prison visits.

EXCERPTS FROM EGYPTIAN DAILY NEWSPAPERS ABOUT MIDDLE EAST WATCH'S MISSION:

*** COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS PRAISES TREATMENT IN PRISONS**

"Minister of Interior Moussa said that the committee for human rights has praised the security apparatus' good treatment of inhabitants of prisons. He added that the foreign radios quoted Middle East Watch sources to this effect and this was broadcast the day before yesterday. And the Minister said that the delegation, headed by Virginia Sherrv, did not come across any complaints during its trips to Abu Zabel, Tora and Qanater prisons and she had no comments on ways prisoners are being treated but delegation did point to the overcrowding of some of the prisons..."

--February 16. *al-Akhbar*, major semi-official daily, page 6

*** DETERMINED TO UPHOLD HUMAN RIGHTS**

"...*Gomhuriyya* learned that the initial impressions of the human rights mission indicated the untruth of allegations of torture, which some are repeating, and their only finding is that prisons are overcrowded, which is a reality the Ministry of Interior is trying to correct."

--February 16. *al-Gomhuriyya*, major semi-official daily

*** GENERAL STRIKE BY DETAINEES IN TORA ISTIKBAL**

"...Virginia Sherrv, the associate director of Middle East Watch, visited Tora Istikbal and met with strikers. They assured her that they were not subject to torture, and reiterated that their demands must be met..."

-- February 17. *al-Wafid*, opposition daily, front page

*** HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE PRAISES GOOD TREATMENT OF PRISONERS**

"An international committee for human rights recently expressed its conviction and admiration for the good treatment of prisoners. According to it, in punishing guilty people, the most modern humane ways are used -- this was said by Interior Minister Moussa. And he affirmed that the Committee that recently visited several Egyptian prisons found no evidence of torture or mistreatment of the prisoners inside the prisons. But the only thing the Committee expressed was overcrowding of the cells in the prisons..."

-- February 19. *al-Ahram*, leading semi-official daily, front page

*** INTERIOR MINISTER AFFIRMS RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE PRISONS**

"The Interior Minister has reiterated that the security apparatus respects human rights both inside and outside the jails. He said the problem of overcrowding in jails was due to lack of funds. He added that Virginia Sherrv -- head of the Middle East Watch mission now visiting Egypt -- assured him that she met with no complaints of torture or abuse of human rights inside the jails. The Minister said Sherrv thanked him for the help of the security apparatus in facilitating the delegation's visits to several Egyptian prisons. Moussa said he met with the delegation shortly before its departure and that they discussed two particular prison cases that the delegation was interested in."

-- February 20. *al-Wafid*, page 4

It is the general policy of Middle East Watch -- and Human Rights Watch, our parent organization -- to refrain from issuing public statements about preliminary findings at the conclusion of fact-finding missions. However, given the misrepresentations that have appeared in the Egyptian press over the last few days, we believe it is necessary to clarify the facts about our work in Egypt over the last three weeks and to state publicly our preliminary findings. Our intent is to correct any misimpressions and to set the record straight.

■ The Purpose of the MEW Mission

MEW conducted a fact-finding mission in Egypt from 27 January to 20 February 1992, to investigate arrest and detention practices, and allegations of torture and mistreatment of detainees by Egyptian security forces. MEW informed the Egyptian government of this mission on 23 December 1991.

Since late January, MEW has conducted scores of interviews throughout Egypt with former detainees, lawyers and others, and has had discussions with officials of the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Interior, including Interior Minister Muhammed Abdel Halim Moussa on 15 February.

While this mission was in progress, the Egyptian government offered MEW access to prisons of our choice, and we visited six facilities over an eight-day period.¹

Contrary to Egyptian press reports and statements by the Minister of Interior, MEW received numerous complaints from prisoners and detainees during the prison visits. These complaints were broadly focused on two issues: arrest and detention practices, and prison conditions and treatment. These complaints correspond with the testimony obtained by MEW in interviews with scores of former detainees during this mission and during a fact-finding mission to Egypt in May 1990.

■ Arrest and Detention Practices: Preliminary Findings

Regarding arrest and detention practices in Egypt, MEW took numerous credible accounts detailing the following abuses:

*** Incommunicado detention by State Security Intelligence (SSI) forces immediately following the first days of arrest at locations that are not prisons, such as SSI office buildings, SSI offices in**

¹MEW visited Abu Zabel Liman on February 12, Tora Liman on February 13, the Women's Prison at Qanater on February 15, Tora Istikbal on February 16, Tora Mazra'at on February 18, and the General Prison in Tanta on February 19. The visit to Tora Istikbal on February 16 took place while a hunger strike by some 400 political detainees was in progress and, for the first time, the authorities severely limited MEW's access to a prison. The authorities at Tora promised that MEW could return to Tora Istikbal for another visit on February 18 to inspect the balance of the facility and meet with additional detainees. When MEW returned on February 18, access to Tora Istikbal and the still-striking detainees was denied by General Abdel Hakim al-Wakil, the commander of the six-prison Tora complex.

police stations, or Central Security Forces military camps.

- * **Unsupervised interrogation by SSI officers of detainees at these locations, often for one week or longer, without the presence of prosecutors from the Ministry of Justice or private attorneys.**
- * **Blindfolding, torture and mistreatment of detainees under SSI interrogation or in SSI custody, prior to their transfer to prison facilities.**
- * **Torture typically is used to elicit confessions, obtain information, or intimidate and threaten. Torture victims generally are stripped of their clothes and bound by their hands and feet. They are sometimes forced to stand for long periods of time and are deprived of food, water or sleep. During torture, victims are subject to various insults and threatened with further abuse or the abuse of family members. In nearly all cases victims are sensory deprived by long periods of blindfolding, which also prevents them from identifying their torturers.**
- * **Methods of torture typically used in Egypt include:**
 - **beating and kicking bound and blindfolded detainees**
 - **hanging a detainee from his bound wrists or feet for long periods of time**
 - **hanging a detainee over an open door by binding his hands behind his back and placing his arms over the top of the door**
 - **binding the detainee's hands and feet around a pole placed above his forearms and behind his knees which is suspended between two chairs while the soles and tops of his feet are beaten with a blunt object**
 - **dousing a detainee intermittently with hot and cold water**
 - **electric-shocking a detainee either while he stands or while he is held to the floor with a chair (electric shocks are often exacerbated by dousing the victim with water first or placing him in a pool of water which is then electrified)**

MEW also took testimony from former detainees who claimed to have been sexually abused.

* **MEW also collected information indicating that detainees held without charge are sometimes removed from prisons and held incommunicado for SSI interrogation, or are taken by the security forces after their court-ordered release from a prison and held incommunicado until new detention orders are issued.**

* **MEW believes that detainees held incommunicado by the security forces during these periods are temporarily "disappeared" persons, in that their detention is unacknowledged by government authorities. Government officials have told MEW that detainees are not held for extended periods of incommunicado detention by SSI in places that are not prisons. Government officials are unable to confirm the whereabouts of such detainees.**

MEW selected two cases of temporary "disappearance" from 1991 and examined Prison Administration computer files containing information about the detainees; the files contained no notation about the date and time of arrest by the security forces or any entry about transfer from a prison to another location.

-- In the case of Dr. Muhammed Mandour, which MEW has followed closely since last year, not one government official interviewed by MEW this month could explain where Dr. Mandour was held after his arrest by SSI forces in the early morning hours of 8 February 1991. Dr. Mandour alleges that he was brutally tortured at SSI headquarters in Cairo where he was held incommunicado from February 8 until his arrival at Abu Zabal Industrial Prison on the morning of 17 February. When MEW asked Prosecutor General Raga al-Araby about the whereabouts of Dr. Mandour during the first ten days of his detention, he told us to ask the Interior Minister. The Interior Minister told MEW to ask prison officials. Prison officials unanimously indicated to MEW that the location of detainees prior to their arrival at a prison is not a matter of their responsibility or concern.

On 20 February, MEW visited Prison Administration headquarters in Cairo and was given access to the computer data base containing information about every detainee and prisoner in Egypt. MEW requested that Dr. Mandour's file be pulled up on the computer screen. The file did not contain information about the date of his arrest, but only indicated that he was detained pursuant to Detention Order No. 408/91, dated 17 February 1991. This is the date that prison records show he was received at Abu Zabal Prison, and the date that Dr. Mandour said he was moved to Abu Zabal from SSI headquarters.

-- MEW also obtained information from the computer data base about the detention of Dr. Ayman Ibrahim Taha. Dr. Taha told MEW that he was arrested on 25 October 1991, and brought directly to Tora Istikbal Prison. He said he was held there for 20 days and then removed to SSI headquarters in Cairo, where he was beaten, verbally abused and threatened. Dr. Taha said that he was returned to Tora prison after six days and released 40 days after his arrest. Dr. Taha's computer file indicated that he was arrested pursuant to Detention Order 15463/91, dated 27 October 1991, and released from Tora Istikbal Prison on 2 December 1991. The file contained no information about Dr. Taha's removal from the prison during his period of detention.

*** Clearly, the security forces' practice of short-term "disappearance" represents an invitation to torture, and the Egyptian government tacitly condones torture by permitting such practices to continue.**

■ Prison Conditions and Treatment: Preliminary Findings

MEW collected information about prison conditions from interviews with inmates, former detainees, and prison officials, and from our own observations at each prison. During our prison visits, the authorities gave us access to regular cells, punishment cells and other facilities. Except for our visit to Tora Istikbal on 16 February, MEW was permitted to enter any part of a prison it requested, including occupied punishment cells. We were allowed to meet with prisoners, including those held in punishment cells, although some prisoners were reluctant to talk, expressing fear of reprisals from the prison authorities.

The voluminous amount of information collected during these prison visits will be carefully analyzed before MEW releases definitive findings in a report later this year. However, because press

reports have wrongfully attributed to MEW conclusions about prison conditions in Egypt – without contacting MEW representatives for comment before running these stories – we are compelled, for the record, to publicly state our preliminary observations.

Contrary to the Egyptian press reports, overcrowding is not the only problem in the prisons we visited. Our major concerns about prison conditions and the treatment of inmates are as follows:

- * Inadequate air and ventilation in cells, exacerbated by overcrowding generally and high temperatures during the summer months;
- * Poor sanitary and hygienic facilities and conditions in living quarters, compounded by overcrowded conditions;
- * Long periods of daily confinement in tightly packed cells, with many inmates afforded only limited time in the open air or outside the cells;
- * Lack of sanitary facilities and running water in cells where there is prolonged daily confinement;
- * Lack of sanitary facilities and running water in punishment cells;
- * Insufficient artificial lighting in living quarters;
- * Credible, detailed reports from inmates about deficient medical services and care from prison doctors employed by the Ministry of the Interior;
- * Poor sanitary and hygienic conditions in prison hospital wards;
- * Reports from inmates about irregular water supply to living quarters in some facilities and, at Liman Abu Zabel Prison, of visibly dirty water from taps;
- * Deteriorated plumbing and hazardous makeshift electrical systems in overcrowded cells;
- * Punishing conditions for detainees during initial days or weeks at a facility;
- * Inappropriate use of punishment cells;
- * Lack of contact between inmates and the *niyaba* (state prosecuting attorney) during the required monthly inspection visits by the *niyaba*, with the exception of facilities where women are held;

* * *

Egypt's Prison Population: Statistics

The prison authorities informed MEW that as of February 20 there were 35,321 individuals (1,441 of them women) in Egypt's 30 prisons. This number included sentenced prisoners, detainees held under investigation without charge, and detainees awaiting trial or in trial proceedings. According to information provided to MEW by the Ministry of Interior's Prison Administration on February 20, there were 584 political detainees held without charge in Egyptian prisons. The authorities told MEW that 96 sentenced prisoners were condemned to death, seven of them women; MEW met with one of the women -- San'a Ismail, 47, mother of four -- at Qanater Prison on February 15.

* * *

Middle East Watch was created in 1989 to monitor human rights practices in the Middle East and North Africa and to promote respect for internationally recognized standards. The chair of Middle East Watch is Gary Sick, the vice chairs are Lisa Anderson and Bruce Rabb, the executive director is Andrew Whitley, the research director is Eric Goldstein, the associate director is Virginia N. Sherry, the senior researcher is Aziz Abu-Hamad, and the associate is Christina Derry.

Middle East Watch is a component of Human Rights Watch, a non-governmental organization which is also composed of Africa Watch, Americas Watch, Asia Watch, the Fund for Free Expression and Helsinki Watch. The chair of Human Rights Watch is Robert L. Bernstein, the vice chair is Adrian W. DeWind, the executive director is Aryeh Neier, the deputy director is Kenneth Roth, the Washington director is Holly J. Burkhalter, and the press director is Susan Osnos.

For more information, contact Virginia Sherry at (212) 972-8400.

**** February 16, al-Ahram, page 17**

"Interior Minister Moussa met with Virginia Sherry, associate director of Middle East human rights organization. The Minister affirmed the Egyptian security apparatus' strong commitment to respect for human rights. Sherry and accompanying delegation were previously given permission to visit Tora, Abu Zabal and Qanater prisons in order to sit with prisoners and discuss with them their treatment."