

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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(Beirut) [Egyptian](#) Interior Ministry security forces stormed into prison cells attacking and injuring hundreds of political prisoners at Borg al-Arab Prison in Alexandria during the week of November 13, 2016, Human Rights Watch said today. The attacks came after prisoners protested poor conditions and humiliating treatment. Egypt's prosecutor general should order a prompt and transparent investigation into the events and hold those officers responsible for abuse to account.

Families and lawyers of prisoners said that prison guards attacked the inmates in their cells with batons, sticks, teargas, and pepper spray, causing burns and fractures. One prisoner appears to have sustained some form of brain trauma, causing memory loss. Lawyers said the prisoners believed the Interior Ministry's Central Security Forces probably provided support.

Instead of investigating complaints of abusive treatment and poor conditions, Egyptian authorities attacked and beat the prisoners said [Joe Stork](#), deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. Egyptian authorities are responsible for the wellbeing of everyone in their custody and have a duty to investigate if prison or security officials cause them harm, and to hold those responsible to account.

Following the attacks, on at least three days, prison authorities transferred at least 250 inmates, including some who were injured, to three other prisons Minya, Gamasa, and Wadi al-Natroun all far from Alexandria, which inmates and their families consider a punishment.

Human Rights Watch spoke with the sister of one inmate, the father of three other inmates, lawyers for 10 inmates, and a lawyer who is also a prominent Alexandria rights activist and reviewed Facebook posts by family members of several other inmates who had been beaten. The family members said that the authorities threw away inmates belongings, including utensils, hygiene products, clothes, and medicine, and then transferred them and dozens of other inmates, in batches to other prisons. The prison authorities handcuffed and blindfolded inmates in their cells before forcing them into transfer vans. The family members and lawyers told Human Rights Watch that security forces beat inmates when they arrived at the prisons in Gamasa and Minya.

Neither the Interior Ministry nor the Prosecutor General's office released any statement on the events and the prosecutor general has not responded to [a December 16 letter from Human Rights Watch](#) requesting information.

Family members alleged that the attacks began after inmates objected to the authorities humiliating treatment, especially of death row inmates. Family members said that visitors on November 13 [reported hearing firing and explosions at the prison](#) as well as chants and other loud noises from inside. Families gathered outside the prison on the following days, they said. Videos posted by inmates' families on Facebook on November 14 and 15 showed [families gathering outside the prison](#) and asking to see their relatives, while others tried to prevent vans transferring prisoners from moving.

Family members who spoke with Human Rights Watch, and others on Facebook, said their imprisoned relatives had given them the name of an Interior Ministry general who they said supervised the beatings and transfer of inmates.

The families said that when they were able to visit their relatives in the new prisons, the prisoners were wearing torn clothes and had bruises and other signs of beatings and burns. One father said his son, Moaz Saleh, could not recognize any member of his family when they visited him and seemed to be suffering from memory loss. Saleh's family submitted a request for Saleh to be examined by doctors from the Justice Ministry's Forensic Medical Authority, but prosecutors ignored it, they said.

Families also said that security officers at the three new prisons violated national rules on visitation rights by limiting visiting times to as

little as five minutes and making them meet while separated by barbed wire and without privacy. Family visits should last at least one hour, according to Egyptian prison regulations amended in 2014.

Two lawyers, two family members, and the Alexandria-based rights activist Mahienour al-Masry said that a large number of families submitted group complaints about the attacks to prosecutors. The lawyers said that it was not until dozens of relatives gathered outside al-Manshiya Court in Alexandria that prosecutors formally acknowledged receiving the complaints and invited the relatives to provide their accounts.

The sister of one inmate said that the prosecutor she met with initially refused to write down in his notes the names of officers she alleged were involved in the mass beating and who are all also part of the Investigation Division of Borg al-Arab Prison. After she insisted, she said, the prosecutor wrote down the names. Human Rights Watch reviewed complaints to the prosecutors in which family members provided names of the officers they said were involved in the attacks.

Lawyers said that prosecutors twice visited Borg al-Arab approximately a week after the events to ask inmates for their accounts, but the lawyers were not aware of any further steps by prosecutors to open any investigations. Lawyers said that the prosecutors did not visit any of the hundreds of inmates transferred to other prisons after the attacks. Lawyers also said they were not aware of prosecutors calling any officers for interrogation.

Lawyers said that prosecutors rejected or ignored requests from inmates to be examined by the Justice Ministry's Forensic Medical Authority. Prompt medical examinations are key in cases of alleged abuse to preserve forensic evidence. Mohamed Hafez, one of the lawyers, said that authorities refused to grant him and another lawyer access to inmates who had been transferred to the Borg al-Arab Prison hospital.

In September, Human Rights Watch released an [80-page report documenting systematic abuses against prisoners in Cairo's Scorpion Prison](#), including some that most likely amounted to torture. The report also documented how insufficient independent prison oversight together with problematic prison laws facilitates abuses and impunity.

When officials responsible for investigating abuses take no action in the face of widespread complaints, it reinforces how little the rule of law seems to mean in Egypt today, Stork said.

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