

Egyptian military tortured, “disappeared” thousands of demonstrators

By Tom Eley
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Since demonstrations and strikes erupted against the Mubarak regime on January 25, the Egyptian military has arrested, tortured and “disappeared” thousands, according to reports from the *Guardian* newspaper and human rights organizations.

The revelations explode the claim advanced by the Obama administration that Egypt’s army is a neutral arbiter in the crisis and can lead a “transition” to human rights and democracy. They also give the lie to the claim that the military can be relied upon to protect the population from the hated state security forces, an argument advanced by both Mohammed ElBaradei and the Muslim Brotherhood. The military has, in fact, assumed the brutal role of the police and security forces, which have, at least in part, dissolved in the face of the revolution.

According to Human Rights Watch, at least 302 Egyptians have been killed in the protests, the vast majority of these at the hands of the security forces, pro-government thugs and the military. Heba Morayef, a researcher for Human Rights Watch in Cairo who participated in the count, said that the ultimate number will likely be far higher.

The number of the disappeared—those arrested by the military with no record or official acknowledgement of their fate—runs into the hundreds, possibly thousands, Hossam Bahgat, director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights in Cairo, told the *Guardian*. Their “crimes” include carrying political leaflets, attending demonstrations, “or even the way they look,” the newspaper reports.

“Their range is very wide, from people who were at the protests or detained for breaking curfew, to those who talked back at an army officer or were handed over to the army for looking suspicious or for looking like foreigners even if they were not,” Bahgat said.

“It’s unusual and to the best of our knowledge it’s also unprecedented for the army to be doing this.”

He continued, “Detentions either go completely unreported or they are unable to inform their family members or any lawyer of their detention so they are much more difficult to assist or look for. Those held by the military police are not receiving any due process either because they are unaccounted for and they are unable to inform anyone of their detention.”

One person who has vanished after being detained by the military near Tahrir Square is Kareem Amer, a blogger and opponent of the Mubarak regime who had only recently been released from a four-year prison sentence for criticizing the regime.

As is the usual practice for the police and security forces, the military is subjecting those arrested to torture. The *Guardian* spoke “to detainees who say they have suffered extensive beatings and other abuses at the hands of the military in what appears to be an organised campaign of intimidation.” Among the documented forms of torture the newspaper uncovered is the use of electrical shocks on prisoners.

Human Rights Watch reported the military abuse of one anonymous activist who was stopped at a military checkpoint where a pro-democracy flier was found in his bag.

“They started beating me up in the street [with] their rubber batons and an electric Taser gun, shocking me,” the activist said. “Then they took me to Abdin police station. By the time I arrived, the soldiers and officers there had been informed that a ‘spy’ was coming, and so when I arrived they gave me a ‘welcome beating’ that lasted some 30 minutes.”

He was then forced to undress, at which point cables from an “electric shock machine” were attached to his body.

“He shocked me all over my body, leaving no place untouched. It wasn’t a real interrogation; he didn’t ask that many questions. He tortured me twice like this on Friday, and one more time on Saturday,” the man said.

The *Guardian* spoke with a 23-year-old man, Ashraf, who was detained by the military on Friday for attempting to bring medical supplies to the demonstrators in Tahrir Square in Cairo. He described his ordeal in a makeshift prison at the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities on the edge of Tahrir Square.

“I was on a sidestreet and a soldier stopped me and asked me where I was going. I told him and he accused me of working for foreign enemies and other soldiers rushed over and they all started hitting me with their guns.

“They put me in a room. An officer came and asked me who was paying me to be against the government. When I said I wanted a better government he hit me across the head and I fell to the floor. Then soldiers started kicking me. One of them kept kicking me between my legs.

“They got a bayonet and threatened to rape me with it. Then they waved it between my legs. They said I could die there or I could disappear into prison and no one would ever know. The torture was painful but the idea of disappearing in a military prison was really frightening.”

Ashraf, who did not give his last name for fear of reprisals, said that he was beaten off and on for hours, before being placed in a room with about a dozen other men who had been badly tortured.

Last week the military allowed pro-Mubarak thugs, many of them plainclothes security forces, to attack demonstrators over the space of three days with Molotov cocktails, iron rods, vehicles, horses, and even guns. An unknown number were killed and scores were injured in these assaults.

Human rights organizations say that the military did not generally detain the pro-Mubarak fighters, and when they did they have not been subject to the same abuses as the demonstrators. Instead, they have been turned over to the police and security forces—very likely their employers.

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