

Human Rights Watch: Egyptian regime guilty of crimes against humanity

By Nick Barrickman
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A report released Tuesday by Human Rights Watch details abuses and violations of international law carried out by the military junta that took power in Egypt in the July 2013 coup that ousted the elected Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi.

The report, entitled *All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt*, shows that the junta, led by then-Defense Minister and now President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, implemented previously drawn up plans to conduct a campaign of mass repression. In the aftermath of the coup, the military regime killed thousands and imprisoned tens of thousands.

"The unprecedented violence used by Egyptian security forces... constitutes serious violations of international human rights law," the report states, adding that "[t]he indiscriminate and deliberate use of lethal force resulted in one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history."

In raising accusations of crimes against humanity, the authors write that the Egyptian junta engaged in "specific criminal acts committed on a widespread or systematic basis as part of an 'attack on a civilian population,' meaning there is some degree of planning or policy to commit the crime." The authors make the point that in terms of sheer numbers, the killings of protesters on August 14, 2013 at Rab'a Square in Cairo exceed events such as the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989 and the Andijan Massacre that occurred in Uzbekistan in 2005.

HRW interviewed hundreds of witnesses in assembling the report. In addition, investigators visited the site of the massacres within hours of the killings on a number of occasions and reviewed hours of television footage and public statements released by officials. The investigators state that they made requests for government participation that were ignored.

The coup was the response of the US-backed Egyptian military to the revolution in 2011 that deposed the dictatorial regime of Hosni Mubarak. In June 2012, Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi won the first

presidential election held in Egypt in the wake of the uprising. By late June 2013, the Morsi government was facing a desperate crisis. The regime's anti-democratic and pro-business policies had provoked mass protests even larger than those that led to the fall of Mubarak.

To preempt the emergence of an independent revolutionary movement of the Egyptian working class, the military, with the support of the US and Western imperialism as a whole, orchestrated the coup that placed al-Sisi in power. The critical political role was played by the so-called Tamarod alliance, which, with the support of the Revolutionary Socialists and other pseudo-left organizations in Egypt, called for the military to intervene against the Morsi government.

While refusing to characterize the military takeover as a coup, so as not to trigger US laws that would require the termination of economic and military aid, Washington issued hypocritical and pro forma criticisms of the murderous tactics of the al-Sisi regime and, for a short period, suspended direct military aid to Egypt.

US Secretary of State John Kerry met with al-Sisi and Foreign Minister and Mubarak-era official Sameh Shoukry last June to announce the resumption of \$575 million in direct military aid and to congratulate the two on Egypt's so-called "democratic transition."

Last May, al-Sisi claimed the Egyptian presidency in a sham election marked by mass voter abstention, which the US and the European powers immediately declared to be legitimate.

The HRW report focuses on the events of August 14, 2013, when nearly 2,000 supporters of the Morsi government were massacred or detained by security forces in Rab'a Square in downtown Cairo. That morning, citing alleged disturbances and reports of "terrorism," security forces sealed off all routes in or out of the thoroughfare. Minutes after issuing barely audible warnings of the impending crackdown, police and troops opened fire on the crowd with birdshot as well as live ammunition, killing hundreds, including women and children.

The report states that victims of the attack flooded nearby Rab'a hospital with wounds from live rounds, in many cases to the head or chest. One protestor is cited as stating it appeared to be "raining bullets" as he fled the crackdown.

Police snipers stationed above the entrance of the building fired on anyone attempting to enter or exit the hospital. Later in the evening, security forces seized the hospital, ordering all occupants, including doctors and nurses, to vacate, forcing them to leave the wounded and dead behind.

"As the last protesters left the square, fires broke out on the central stage, the field hospital, the mosque, and on the first floor of Rab'a hospital," the report says, adding that "[e]vidence strongly suggests that the police deliberately started these fires."

At the time, security officials sought to justify the killings by claiming self-defense against hostile protesters. Debunking such claims, HRW cites statements by Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim, who at the time reported finding few firearms at the scene after protesters had been dispersed.

The report indicts the Egyptian government for the attacks, declaring "the most senior security officials and key leaders in the chain of command should be held individually accountable for the widespread and systematic killings of protesters."

It singles out Ibrahim, Special Forces head Medhat Menshawy and al-Sisi himself as bearing particular responsibility, with the latter quoted as saying that "we spent very many long days to discuss all the details to arrive where the dispersal will not result in any losses."

In fact, leading government officials expected even higher losses of life. The report refers to a televised interview in which the interior minister stated that his staff envisioned casualties as high as "10 percent of the people" in the crowd, which he calculated to be roughly 20,000.

In all, at least 1,600 people were killed or arrested in the Rab'a Square crackdown. Those who were not killed face trumped-up charges and torture at the hands of the government.

"Many of the trials reviewed by Human Rights Watch have been grossly unfair and riddled with serious due process violations, violating both Egyptian law and international standards," the report states. It refers to the death sentences issued to over 1,200 Muslim Brotherhood officials in March and April of this year, in which defendants were denied counsel and in certain cases not even allowed to be present in the courtroom.

Flagrant violations of democratic rights have continued in Egypt throughout al-Sisi's time in power. "The use of excessive force escalated significantly with the overthrow of Morsi in July 2013," the report notes, citing incidents

throughout the past year in which security forces have massacred protestors.

The junta has attacked freedom of the press, shutting down television stations critical of the government. It has outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood as a "terrorist organization." Last Sunday, an Egyptian court issued a ruling dissolving the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization.

The authors of the HRW report have been denied entry to Egypt to present their work to the government.

Investigators note that while thousands have been rounded up and sentenced by the government, not even a single low-level official has been charged for his role in the killings. On the contrary, HRW notes, in addition to the officials involved receiving salary bonuses, Rab'a Square authorities have erected a monument dedicated to the police.

The massacre at Rab'a Square came against a background of mass protests against the junta's illegal seizure of power. The report documents at least five other incidents from July 5 to August 16, 2013 in which security forces shot and killed protestors.

Other mass killing incidents include, but are not limited to:

- The July 8 gunning down of 61 Morsi supporters at a sit-in in front of the Republican Guard headquarters in eastern Cairo.
- The July 27 killing of 95 pro-Morsi demonstrators at the Manassa Memorial located in eastern Cairo.
- The August 14 and 16 killings of protestors at al-Nahda and Ramses squares, which totaled more than 200 dead between them.

While issuing an indictment of various atrocities, the report is silent on the role of both the US and European governments. Calling on the United Nations Human Rights Council to conduct an investigation into the killings and for charges to be brought against al-Sisi and his accomplices, the report effectively whitewashes the chief conspirators in Washington and Europe.

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