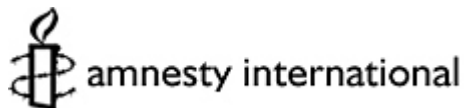


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Amnesty International Annual Report 2012 - Algeria

Head of state: Abdelaziz Bouteflika
Head of government: Ahmed Ouyahiya
Death penalty: abolitionist in practice
Population: 36 million
Life expectancy: 73.1 years
Under-5 mortality: 32.3 per 1,000
Adult literacy: 72.6 per cent

The government lifted the nationwide state of emergency in force since 1992, but maintained tight restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly, and on practising religious beliefs. The security forces used excessive force in dispersing some demonstrations and in response to instances of rioting; several people were killed. Detainees remained at risk of torture and other ill-treatment. Women continued to face discrimination in law and in practice and to be inadequately protected against gender-based violence, including within the family. No steps were taken to address the legacy of impunity for gross human rights abuses committed in the past. Death sentences continued to be handed down but there were no executions. Armed groups carried out attacks, killing some civilians.

Background

After mass protests and some rioting in January, demonstrations were held periodically throughout the year against food and other price rises, unemployment, poor housing conditions, official corruption and violence by the security forces. Many were called by the National Co-ordination for Change and Democracy, an umbrella group of opposition parties, trade unions and human rights organizations. The group was formed in January after protests and riots were violently suppressed by the security forces; several people were killed, hundreds were injured and hundreds more arrested.

The authorities took steps to address some of the protesters' grievances, temporarily cutting taxes on some basic foodstuffs and in February lifting the national state of emergency in force since 1992. In April, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced planned reforms, including new laws to liberalize elections and the media, and the appointment of a committee to reform the Constitution, but these had not been fully implemented by the end of the year, and many of the laws subsequently adopted were criticized for not going far enough.

The government permitted visits by the UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of expression and housing but continued to block long-standing requests for visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

Freedom of expression, association and assembly

The government continued to restrict freedom of expression and to prohibit unauthorized public gatherings. Mass protests in January in Algiers, Oran and other cities were violently dispersed by thousands of riot police and other security forces, leading to deaths and injuries. In the following weeks, thousands of security forces were deployed ahead of protests called in Algiers and other cities on 12 February. The authorities also reportedly blocked access to Facebook and Twitter in some areas to obstruct efforts to organize and co-ordinate protests.

After the state of emergency was lifted on 24 February, it became lawful to demonstrate anywhere but Algiers if prior authorization was granted. However, such authorization was often denied. Nevertheless, many unauthorized protests were staged in Algiers and elsewhere. The security forces often dispersed these using tear gas and water cannon, and arrested demonstrators. Some of those arrested were charged and tried before criminal courts for "unlawful unarmed gathering" and assaulting the security forces. Most were subsequently acquitted.

In December, the parliament passed a new media law that restricts journalists' activities in areas such as state security, national sovereignty and economic interests, and sets down heavy fines as punishment for breaking it.

Human rights organizations reported that the authorities sometimes refused to grant them permission to hold meetings. Trade union activists said they were harassed by the security forces. The government reportedly refused to approve new associations or political parties, informing applicants that they should wait for new laws to be passed. In December, the parliament passed a new law on associations giving the authorities extensive powers to suspend or dissolve NGOs and further restricting their registration and funding.

Counter-terror and security

Armed groups, particularly Al-Qa'ida Organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), carried out a number of attacks. These mostly targeted military installations but also caused civilian deaths. Over 100 alleged members of AQIM and other Islamist armed groups were reported to have been killed by the security forces, often in unclear circumstances, prompting fears that some may have been extrajudicially executed.

- An AQIM attack on a military barracks at Cherchell on 26 August reportedly killed two civilians and 16 soldiers.

In February, a presidential decree gave the army powers to combat terrorism, at the same time as lifting the state of emergency.

Also in February, a presidential decree amending the Code of Criminal Procedures gave judges the power to refer terrorism suspects to "secure establishments" in undisclosed locations for months at a time, in effect allowing for secret detention for prolonged periods.

Those detained as terrorism-related suspects were allegedly tortured and ill-treated while held by the Department of Information and Security (military intelligence), and in some cases were detained incommunicado in what may have amounted to enforced disappearances.

- On 18 July, Abdelhakim Chenoui and Malik Medjnoun were sentenced to 12 years in prison after an apparently unfair trial after which they were found guilty of murdering Kabyle singer Lounès Matoub years before. Both had been held without trial since 1999. Their conviction was based on a "confession" that Abdelhakim

Chenoui said he had been forced to make under duress and which he later retracted.

Women's rights

Women remained subject to discrimination under the law and in practice. In particular, under the 2005 Family Code, women's rights are subordinated to those of men in matters relating to marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance.

In May, after visiting Algeria in April, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women said the government had taken positive steps to advance women's rights but urged the authorities to address continuing violence against women in the family, sexual harassment, and stigmatization of unmarried single women and women living on their own.

In November, the National Assembly passed a law to increase the representation of women in parliament, but did not adopt draft proposals for a 30 per cent quota in all constituencies or for women to be placed high on electoral lists.

- In June and July, groups of young men in the northern city of M'sila were reported to have attacked women they accused of prostitution.

Impunity – enforced disappearances

The authorities again took no steps to investigate the thousands of enforced disappearances and other serious abuses that took place during the internal conflict in the 1990s or to ensure that perpetrators were held accountable. They continued to implement the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation (Law 06-01), which gave impunity to the security forces, criminalized public criticism of their conduct and granted amnesties to members of armed groups responsible for gross human rights abuses. Families of people who disappeared faced pressure to accept generic certificates, which stated that their relatives were dead but did not specify the date or cause of death, as a precondition for claiming compensation. The security forces dispersed demonstrations organized by families of the disappeared.

Freedom of religion or belief

Christians, including converts, continued to face prosecution for unauthorized religious activity under Ordinance 06-03 regulating faiths other than the state religion, Islam. Under the legislation, Christians continued to face hindrances building or maintaining churches. In May, the governor of the north-east province of Béjaïa ordered the closure of all churches on the basis of the law. The order was countermanded by the Minister of Interior.

- On 25 May, a court in Cité Jamal in the city of Oran sentenced Abdelkarim Siaghi, a Christian convert, to five years' imprisonment and a heavy fine for "offending the Prophet Mohamed" after what was reported to be an unfair trial in which his lawyers were not permitted to cross-examine witnesses. He remained at liberty at the end of the year, awaiting the outcome of an appeal.

Death penalty

Courts continued to hand down death sentences, mostly against people tried in their absence for terrorism-related offences. The last execution took place in 1993.

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