



EGYPT DISCRIMINATION

NEWS

## Egyptian army must answer for deadly toll at Coptic protest

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Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) must urgently explain how a protest against religious discrimination turned into a bloodbath, Amnesty International said today after deadly protests in Cairo on Sunday left at least 25 dead. More than 200 people – including many protesters and reportedly members of the security forces – were also wounded in the incident, the worst violence Egypt has seen since former President Hosni Mubarak stepped down in February. Video footage showed military vehicles running over protesters while driving through crowded streets. “One can only wonder what orders were given that could have led to military vehicles running down protesters on the streets. If the military police and other security forces were not acting under orders, it raises questions about their ability to police demonstrations in the first place,” said Amnesty International. “Now, Egypt’s SCAF must show it can and will rein in the security forces and ensure they do not use excessive force. Instructions to security forces must be immediately issued and an independent investigation opened.” Medical staff at Cairo’s Coptic Hospital, where a large number of the dead and injured were taken after the incident, told Amnesty International that the casualties included bullet wounds and crushed body parts resulting from people being deliberately run over by army vehicles. Witnesses described how security forces in armoured vehicles opened fire into the crowds and killed or injured protesters by running over them. Military officials maintain that a group of protesters initiated the violence, and have said they intend to open an investigation. Other reports said “thugs” hired by members of the disbanded National Democratic Party, Hosni Mubarak’s political party, were behind the violence. Yesterday the Public Prosecutor started preliminary interrogations of those injured in the clashes and 21 people were detained for 15 days, pending further investigation. The SCAF yesterday ordered the establishment of a fact-finding commission to investigate the incident. “Any investigation into Sunday’s clashes must be independent, thorough and impartial, deliver answers to the Egyptian public, and identify those responsible,” said Amnesty International. “The investigation cannot be in the hands of the army and must be truly independent, and seen as such for the witnesses and the families of the victims to trust that they can safely provide evidence and expect more than a whitewash.” Amnesty International is also deeply concerned over reporting by state television, according to which troops were under attack by protesters, and which called for Egyptians to support and “defend” them, further exacerbating the situation. Two other television stations covering the protests, 25TV and Al Hurra, were raided by security forces, apparently in an attempt to stem independent reporting. “The SCAF have been quick to place the blame on foreign ‘conspiracies’, sectarian tensions, or with protesters,” said Amnesty International. “They have so far

refused to accept that the responsibility for the violence may lie in their policing of demonstrations.”This latest incident took place against a backdrop of sectarian tensions, which have been on the rise in recent months in Egypt. Though Copts make up close to 10 per cent of Egypt’s population, official policies discriminate against them, including by denying them places of worship. The attack on a Coptic church in Aswan province on 30 September, which fuelled Sunday’s protest, is just the latest such incident. Local authorities said the church was built without permission. Following sectarian clashes last May and June, the government announced plans to issue a unified law for places of worship and to open all closed churches after examination. No such law was issued and the government promised in a meeting yesterday that the law will be in place within two weeks.

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