Coronavirus Adds Urgency to Ending Egypt’s Detention and Torture of Children

by Aya Hijazi and Bill Van Esveld
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The United States has long justified its support for Egyptian security services as necessary for the security and stability of Egypt and the region. Yet the means by which the Egyptian security services operate include arbitrarily arresting and torturing some of the most vulnerable members of the population – children. Now, with the coronavirus sweeping through the Middle East and conditions for children in detention ripe for a public health crisis, the situation is more dire than ever. The United States must end support to security services that disappear and torture children, and should stand up and press Egypt to end widespread abuses of detainees’ rights and the routine use of detention against children.

The case of a 17-year-old detainee named Wesam illustrates the abuses. For three frantic days in late 2017, Wesam’s family and friends had no idea where he was. Eventually they learned he had been arrested on his way to a protest. In his first days of detention, he was given only the soldiers’ and guards’ leftovers to eat, and he was interrogated for hours on end without being allowed to see a lawyer. He spent the next five months in a crowded cell at a Cairo police station that measured 9 x 9 feet. There were never fewer than 15 detainees, some of them adults, crammed in with him. The cell was so packed that inmates “slept on a shift schedule: a group of us sleeps for six hours, and another group wakes up,” he told us.

As of April 2020, Wesam is still under investigation for alleged membership in the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement the government outlawed as a “terrorist” organization and recently blamed for spreading the coronavirus. He is required to check in at a police station every day.
But he is one of the lucky ones. Egyptian security services have disappeared other children for up to 15 months and tortured them. In our work with Human Rights Watch and the U.S.-based rights organization Belady: An Island for Humanity, we recently reported on children detained for political reasons in Egypt. Like Wesam, most were held with adults in overcrowded, poorly ventilated cells, and denied adequate food and medical care. Many were also tortured.

Consider the case of Abdullah, who was only 12 when he was disappeared on December 31, 2017, a few months after his older brother joined a group that claims affiliation with the Islamic State (ISIS). For the first six months, Abdullah was held in several detention centers, where he was shocked with electricity, waterboarded, suspended by his right hand, and forced to lie on a burning hot metal bed frame. For the next 100 days, he was held in solitary confinement and denied adequate food, family visits, medical care, and the chance to bathe. After a period of slightly improved treatment, a police officer at the station where he was being held promised in January 2019 to return him to his family. However, when his older sister arrived the next day to collect him, officers denied knowledge of his whereabouts. His family has not seen him since.

Or consider what happened to Hamza, who is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence. He was 14 when forces from the Interior Ministry’s National Security Agency disappeared him in 2016 for allegedly taking part in a demonstration. For two days, officers shocked Hamza with electricity on his genitals, head, and tongue. On the third day, they suspended him from behind by his arms, which dislocated both his shoulders. He was left in an unheated corridor for three more days, in winter, then taken to an underground cell. On Hamza’s 15th birthday, a guard overheard him speaking to another prisoner, which was prohibited, and forced the boy to stand on tiptoe after placing sharp nails under his heels. “He hates his birthday now, he does not want to celebrate it again,” a relative told us.

It shouldn’t take a pandemic to get the United States to press Egypt to stop detaining and torturing children. But as the coronavirus pandemic scythes its way through the Middle East, abuses like these are exacerbating public health risks in the most populous country in the region. Arbitrary arrests and the use of detention as the default for children accused of crimes increases overcrowding in cells that often lack not just running water for handwashing, but also toilets, with inmates forced to use buckets.
Prison authorities seldom provide hygiene products, which prisoners or their families must buy, and reportedly punish prisoners by confiscating items like soap and toilet paper. Even before the pandemic, United Nations experts warned last year that such inhumane conditions “may be placing the health and lives of thousands [of] prisoners at severe risk.”

**Egyptian Authorities Ignore Own Laws Against Abuse**

Egyptian law requires security officials to bring detainees before prosecutors, who are part of Egypt’s judicial branch, within 24 hours of their arrest. The authorities met that deadline in only one of the 20 cases we documented of child detainees, from 10 governorates across the country. The other 19 children were forcibly disappeared. When authorities eventually presented each child to the prosecution, they falsely reported that the child was arrested that day or the day before.

Egypt’s laws prescribe penalties for security officials who arrest and detain people without a warrant, detain children with adults, or torture detainees to extract confessions. These laws were effectively ignored in all the cases we documented. Fifteen out of the 20 children were physically tortured during interrogation, another was verbally threatened to confess to crimes, and another was badly beaten by prison officials.

Under Egypt’s Child Law, only officials appointed by the justice minister can arrest children, and only specialized Child Courts and Child Prosecution Offices can try them – unless the child was involved in the alleged crime with at least one adult. The authorities have exploited this loophole in scores of cases to try children alongside adults before criminal and terrorism courts. In all the cases we documented, children were detained by police or National Security Agency officers, and they were prosecuted and tried by ordinary as well as special security or military prosecutors and courts.

The Egyptian government refuses to publish accurate information about detainees, including the number of children in detention facilities. But Belady has documented the arrests of more than 2,000 children for political reasons since Egypt’s military took power in 2013. They include 100 of the 180 children arrested in September 2019, following anti-government protests in cities across Egypt, when authorities swept up 4,400 people including protesters, politicians, lawyers, and bystanders.

**U.S. Obligations in Stopping Abuse**

U.S. law and international law – specifically, the prohibition on support for internationally unlawful acts – require the United States to ensure that its support to Egypt is not contributing to serious human rights abuses, including deprivation of the right to life. To accomplish this, Congress should condition U.S. security support to Egypt on an end to the disappearance and torture of children. Congress should also stop including language that allows the Secretary of State to waive human rights conditions on U.S. aid in the name of national security – an allowance that’s made year after year, as if Egypt’s human rights abuses are never quite bad enough.

The virus that causes COVID-19 adds a public health imperative for the United States to press Egypt to release children who should not have been detained in the first place. Other countries in the region have released thousands of detainees. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has called on all governments to “urgently release all children” from detention if they can safely return to their families or if there are other alternatives to detention. UNICEF also has urged an immediate moratorium on any new transfers of children to detention facilities, due to the heightened risk of developing COVID-19 in detention.

Despite these appeals, the Egyptian authorities have conditionally freed only a few detainees, while carrying out new arrests, including people who allegedly spread “false news” about the virus and face five years in prison, and health workers who complained on social media about a lack of masks.

Egypt’s arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment of children continue. Last December, National Security Agency forces arrested 47 children from their homes in Suez. The children disappeared until mid-March, when they reappeared in a prosecutor’s office. They had not been given a change of clothes. Some no longer had their shoes. Only five have been released.

The abuses of children are symptomatic of widespread, serious rights abuses by Egyptian security services. While such abuses continue, the United States should end support for abusive security services, call for the release of detainees and for alternatives to detention, and publicly denounce such gross human rights abuses – to respect the rights of the children, and to contain an impending disaster.

IMAGE: President Donald Trump welcomes Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Monday, April 3, 2017, at the West Wing entrance of the White House in Washington, D.C. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)
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