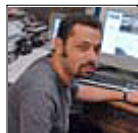


Egyptian bloggers expose horror of police torture

They're posting graphic videos from cell phone cameras and hoping for reform

Steven Stanek, Chronicle Foreign Service

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(10-09) 04:00 PDT Cairo -- Even through a grainy Internet video, the injuries to 13-year-old Mohamed Mamdouh Abdel Aziz are clear: His scrawny frame is tattooed with bruises and burn marks, and his torso is a patchwork of bandages.

The video, which soared across the Egyptian blogosphere in August allegedly showed the boy hours before he died from his injuries, and not long after he was released by police in the town of Mansoura, 75 miles north of Cairo; he had been arrested him for stealing a few bags of tea a week earlier, local media reported.

The explicit 13-minute clip is the latest of some dozen amateur videos - mostly from cell phone cameras - that have surfaced on blogs within the past year, showing systematic torture in Egyptian police stations. The videos have thrust a once rarely mentioned subject onto the front pages of Cairo newspapers.

"Cell phones are now the essential tool of democracy in developing countries," said Hafez Abu Seada, the secretary general of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights.

In a report released in August, the group, a nongovernmental organization that is assisting the Aziz family's legal case, documented 567 known cases of police abuse since 1993, 167 of which resulted in deaths.

Some activists hope the incriminating videos will spur a wave of reforms within the justice system.

"Activists that have worked to end torture have told me: 'You've done more in a few days what we were not able to do in 10 years,' " said Wael Abbas, a 32-year-old Egyptian blogger, who recently received the 2007 Knight International Journalism Award by the International Center for Journalists in Washington for posting police torture videos on his Web site.

The Interior Ministry, which is responsible for overseeing the police, would not comment for this article, but has repeatedly denied that torture is widespread in police stations.

"We deal with thousands of citizens every day and millions every year, and the existence of a few isolated instances does not reflect on the overall performance of the police," an unidentified security source told Al-Ahram newspaper in August.

And Interior Minister Habib El-Adli has said he will not hesitate "to punish whoever is proven to have

administered torture."

Abbas posted the first videos showing police torture in April 2006. They showed one prisoner being slapped in the face repeatedly and another being taunted while balancing a stack of books on his head.

Abbas then sparked a firestorm in November when he became the first to post the video of a bus driver, Emad al-Kabir, being sodomized with a stick in a police station in Giza, outside Cairo. Al-Kabir was arrested in January 2006 after intervening in a scuffle between police and his cousin. Al-Kabir's anguished face has become an iconic symbol of police brutality.

"Sodomy was something very shocking and reminded (Egyptians) of the pictures of Abu Ghraib," Abbas said, referring to the Iraq prison where 11 lower-ranking U.S. soldiers have been convicted for torturing prisoners.

Although rights activists say such abuses are nothing new, they also say this is the first time police torture has been so publicly discussed.

Human rights activists "now have ways to document torture victims. Now we have real credibility," said Tarek Khater, chairman of the Association for Human Rights and Legal Aid, a nongovernmental group that offers free legal services to torture victims.

The video involving Aziz was originally posted by the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's banned but popular opposition to the government of President Hosni Mubarak, whose members frequently accuse the police of torture. Details of the case vary and the circumstances of the boy's alleged torture are unclear.

"This is an electrical burn, his backbone is broken, and his side is cut wide open," said Aziz's mother, Sayeda Sorour, in the video as she wept by her son's bedside after he was released. "Please God have revenge on all police that serve in that station."

The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights insists Aziz was beaten by police in an attempt to extract a confession. Police officials, however, say that the boy died from a sudden lung ailment and that burns found on his body were accidental. Sometime during his imprisonment, the boy was taken to a hospital, where an operation was performed without the consent of his mother. His body was ultimately found dumped on the floor of bus station.

A medical investigation conducted by officials from the health, interior and justice ministries determined the boy died of a botched surgical procedure but did not find evidence of torture. They state prosecutors "don't find evidence of torture for the simple reason they don't look for any," Hamdi El Baz, the Aziz family lawyer told Al-Ahram weekly, an English language newspaper. Since 2001, only 20 police officers have been charged with torture, with only a handful of convictions, according to Abu Seada.

It is unclear whether charges will be brought against the police officers and doctors involved in the Aziz case. But two officers from the same Mansoura station face criminal charges, a rarity, according to human rights groups, in the death of another man who died there days before the boy's death. Most images depicting torture are recorded by police officers, according to Abbas, who says they are sometimes leaked to intimidate the public. He said a typical torture video posted on his Web site can draw up to 1 million hits monthly. In recent weeks, the authorities have begun to fight back.

Last month, government officials closed down the Association for Human Rights and Legal Aid, a

group that has raised many torture cases in court. The group was charged with accepting money from foreign donors - including a U.S. organization, the National Endowment for Democracy - without government consent as required by law. The Egyptian group maintains its closure is part of a ploy to silence government critics and has filed an appeal.

In February, a 22-year-old blogger, Abdel Karim Nabil Suleiman, a student, was sentenced to four years in prison for his online posts, which authorities said insulted Islam and Mubarak.

Other bloggers are routinely detained for covering political protests and strikes. Abbas said he has been detained several times, though never for more than a few hours. "The pressure that is being brought on me is through other means," said Abbas. "They spread rumors about me, claiming that I changed my religion, converted to Catholicism ... that I am a homosexual."

Abbas also doubts that he and his colleagues have had much impact on curtailing police abuse.

"In another country when something like that is exposed, there is supposed to be a major change," he said. "Nothing like that happens in Egypt."

But Naila Hamdy, a journalism professor at the American University in Cairo, disagrees.

"If you can get away with something and you know you can get away with it, it's different than when you think in the back of your mind that someone has a video phone that's filming your behavior," she said. "I am sure these videos will have an affect on behavior."

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/10/09/MNLRRUSMH.DTL>

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