

# How to struggle against torture

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Egyptian human rights activists manage their struggle against torture in several ways. First: on a political level, by stressing that constitutional reform is an essential step towards the safeguarding of human rights; second: via the judiciary we have obtained many judgements condemning torture and punishing torturers; third: through the universities who play a good and efficient role in the field of human rights, including the struggle against torture, and fourth: through the trade unions and associations, especially the Egyptian Medical Association.

The medical association's activities, and the co-operation of the medical profession, in the struggle against torture can be listed under the following headings:

## Reports

We have hundreds of reports of medical examinations performed by doctors working in the Department of Forensic Medicine in the Ministry of Justice. On the basis of these brave and honest reports, our courts delivered great judgements. Those judgements, trusting the reports, decided that all confessions made under torture were null and void. Consequently the courts released the accused in many cases.

We consider it very important to have such reports in every court case, but especially in political cases where police authorities are accustomed to obtaining false confessions under torture.

## The work of the board of the medical association

The board is presided over by an eminent personality, the ex-minister of health, Professor Dr Mamdouh Gabre.

An influential chairman such as Dr Gabre is able to run a good campaign on many levels for the protection of the association's members.

Also, the members of the board have proved many times their determination to defend strongly the association's members in cases of arbitrary detention. At such times they go immediately to meet the Prosecutor General to assure themselves of the legality of procedures. They visit the detained doctors in jail to reassure them of their strong support against the

detainees being subjected to torture and ill treatment. They meet the Prime Minister and send telegrams to the President of the Republic, protesting against arbitrary detention and torture. Under provisions drawn up by the board, families of detained doctors receive good financial aid monthly.

## Political orientation

Like other associations, the Egyptian Medical Association has been involved in many political national problems. The association's general assemblies have, over the past three years, issued recommendations to government to put an end to the emergency law which opens the door to arbitrary detention and torture. At their annual assemblies doctors stressed the importance of public liberty for national development, and asked the government to guarantee the civil liberties of the political parties.

On December 10, 1989, the association commemorated Human Rights Day by publishing a statement deploring the existence of emergency law; the widespread detention of doctors; the torture and ill treatment in detention centres, and the bad conditions in prisons. They asked the President of the Republic to take urgent and efficient measures to put an end to these violations of the constitution and of human rights.

Last year, 1990, doctors throughout Egypt endorsed their board's policy by re-electing in the association's election, by a great majority, those who opposed torture and the infringement of civil liberties.

## Travel to Sudan

The association considers that the abuses of governments and those in authority are the natural reflections and consequences of a lack of democracy. When the military regime in the Republic of Sudan declared the death penalty on the ex-chairman of the Sudanese Medical Association, the chairman and some members of the Egyptian Medical Association flew to Khartoum on a mission of mediation to stop the sentence of death being carried out. The association's efforts were successful: the execution did not go ahead. Thus the medical association added another good deed to its record in the field of human rights.

## Opposition to emergency law

When the government imposed emergency law in October 1981, it promised its provisions would apply only to terrorism and drugs traffic. But gradually the government widened the application of emergency law for political reasons, to suppress opposition. This governmental policy has resulted in thousands of arbitrary detentions accompanied by torture and ill-treatment. Doctors, like others, were victims of the abuse of powers under emergency law. So the medical association demands firmly the abolition of that law because such an emergency law makes it impossible for it to defend its members against tyranny.

## Protest against torture

On September 10, 1989, the *Al Wafd* newspaper published, on its first page, an article stating that the board of the medical association had discussed the problem of arbitrary detentions and torture inflicted upon doctors and had issued a statement calling upon the authorities to give permission to a delegation from the board to visit prisons where doctors were detained. The board asked the government to authorise the medical association to exercise full supervision over prisons and detention centres. The association, said the article, wanted the abolition of torture in prisons and detention centres.

## Children's organisation

On September 23, 1989, the Committee of Liberties of the medical association organised a conference entitled Conference on the So-called Children's Organisation and Egyptian Human Rights. At that conference doctors protested strongly against the Ministry of the Interior for arresting 80 children at the end of a journey organised by the association to Alexandria Beach. The police authorities arrested doctors' children and their supervisors for the journey on the pretext that they were establishing an illegal organisation. The conference provided the opportunity to tell the public how those children were subjected to torture and ill-treatment in detention centres. It proved to be an effective campaign against torture and torturers in the Ministry of the Interior.

## Presence in courts

On August 6, 1989, police authorities arrested some doctors on the pretext that they had established an unlawful Islamic Shia organisation aimed at overwhelming the government by force. The medical association asked its lawyer to join us in defending these political detainees before the Emergency

Supreme Court of State Security. The presence of the association's lawyer in court demonstrated to the court, and to everybody, that the liberty of any doctor is of important concern to all doctors. When the court released the accused doctors the association organised a meeting between these doctors, who had been subjected to torture, and a delegation of Amnesty International.

## Investigation of doctors involved in torture

It is essential to face torture everywhere. One of the main ways doctors can do this is by abstaining from participating actively or passively in torture carried out in detention centres. The Egyptian Medical Association is aware of this obligation and doesn't hesitate to investigate any complaint against doctors involved in torture. In this context the *Al Ahali* newspaper of September 31, 1989, reported that Dr Ahmed El Touni had made a complaint to the medical association against doctors whom he accused of torturing him and other political detainees who were accused of belonging to an 'illegal' Communist organisation. Dr El Touni mentioned the names of the professional colleagues he alleged had conducted this torture. On September 25, 1989, the *Al Wafd* newspaper published a statement issued from Dr Salem Negm, vice chairman of the association, saying that an investigation had begun into doctors accused of tolerating torture in prisons. He declared also that the association had begun to receive complaints from political detainees in this context. When I asked the members of the association's board about the validity of this news, they confirmed that some complaints had been presented to the association against doctors working in prisons. They added that the association's lawyer had transferred these complaints to the public prosecutor. These news items served us in our struggle against torture.

## Code of medical ethics

The published statements of the medical association about investigations conducted into doctors accused of participating in torture send the message to all doctors working in prisons and detention centres that they must respect honestly the UN code of medical ethics. This is a good message, which the medical association, and all those who work with the association in its struggle against torture, endorse.

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