

Egypt Rights Groups Allege Rising Police Brutality
By Sarah El Deeb, Associated Press, ABC News
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Egyptian rights groups alleged Wednesday that police abuse and brutality are on the rise in detention centers and at demonstrations, which have intensified since the second anniversary of the uprising that ousted longtime leader Hosni Mubarak.

More than a dozen groups charged in a statement that police were reverting back to the systematic torture that prevailed under Mubarak's autocratic regime. "Some of the crimes have even gone beyond that," the statement said.

The groups hold President Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's first elected leader after Mubarak's ouster, responsible for failing to stop or condemn such practices. They called on him to sack his interior minister, who oversees the police, and try him in connection with the deaths of nearly 60 protesters since last month across Egypt.

Interior Minister Mohammed Ibrahim denied Tuesday that his forces have shot at protesters, and said only the prime minister can fire him. Ibrahim said his forces don't confront peaceful protesters, and have only used tear gas to break up the deadly riots.

As part of a 10-point initiative, the rights groups asked for more transparency and accountability on crimes committed against protesters since the uprising. They also called for an overhaul of the nation's security forces.

In a widely watched TV program late Tuesday, one victim, whose case was documented by the groups, told viewers of harrowing treatment he received while he was detained for more than 48 hours earlier this month, including being forced to fall to his knees and bark.

"They asked me to choose a woman's name so they can use (it) for me. It was the easiest part of the torture," Ayman Mohanna told the privately owned ONTV station.

He said he was detained with nearly 50 others in a small room where the floor was flooded with water and then electrified.

"We would be jumping up and down like grilled fish," he told the station.

Hossam Bahgat, the head of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, one of the groups documenting testimonies of detainees, said on the TV program that security agents used physical abuse mainly to extract confessions but also to humiliate and punish those who took part in protests.

The groups claim security agents' crackdown on protesters and activists has intensified since Jan. 25, when hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets across Egypt to mark the second anniversary of the start of the uprising against Mubarak's rule.

The protests were critical of Morsi and his government as many Egyptians are growing frustrated over the continued turmoil since Mubarak's ouster in Feb. 2011. Rallies turned to clashes in several cities with police firing tear gas and protesters throwing stones at government offices. At least six civilians were killed.

The violence turned more deadly two days later when a court handed down death sentences to 21 residents of the coastal city of Port Said in connection with a deadly soccer riot a year ago. Angry locals gathered outside the city's prison, demanding that their relatives be freed, and decrying the verdict as unjust.

According to the rights groups, Egyptian security forces opened fire on protesters and at funerals the following day, leaving more than 40 people killed. Ibrahim, the interior minister, claimed in comments to reporters that the first two people who died were policemen.

The rights groups claim the security forces used excessive force to break up the riots outside the prison.

"This has become more aggressive than during the Mubarak days," said Malek Adly, a lawyer of the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, one of the groups issuing the statement.

Adly compared the riots in Port Said with one of the most threatening protests against Mubarak before the uprising. In 2008, thousands of protesters tore down Mubarak's pictures, stepped on them and clashed with the police in the city of Mahalla. Adly alleged that police were responsible for killing three people during that demonstration.

Adly also said more than 1,000 people, including minors, were detained in recent weeks.

Rights groups have also reported the death of a number of activists, including a member of an opposition group, who was allegedly tortured to death in detention. A state medical report denied he was tortured.

The groups say Morsi bears responsibility for failing to stop or condemn such practices. In at least one incident, Morsi thanked the police for the way it handled the protests and described the demonstrators as thugs or die-hard Mubarak loyalists trying to bring down the state.

"Matters were made worse by repeating mistakes of the past when the presidency and the government were late in intervening or condemning such crimes, or taking serious immediate measures to stop them and hold the culprits accountable," the groups said in their statement.

The groups called for the sacking of the Morsi-appointed chief prosecutor for allegedly failing to investigate cases of abuse.

The discontent over the violent crackdown on protesters in the city of Port Said has turned into a general strike campaign in the city. For the fourth day, activists, factory workers and students held rallies in the city and observed a work stoppage that has brought the coastal city on the northern tip of the Suez Canal to a halt.

Shipping in the international waterway has not been affected.

In some cases, activists have enforced participation in the strike, chanting outside government offices for employees to join them and obstructing entrances to factories. On Wednesday, one of the largest companies operating a container terminal in Port Said said its workers were unable to reach the terminal the day before because of the strike.

The protesters are demanding retribution for those killed during the violent clashes late last month and a new investigation into the incident, which they blame on security forces.

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