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EGYPT Anger at manslaughter charges for three soldiers involved in Maspero violence

Three Egyptian soldiers are to stand trial for the manslaughter of 14 of the 27 civilians who died during the violence of October 9, when the Egyptian military attacked a peaceful civil rights demonstration made up largely of members of the Coptic community in Maspero, Cairo.

The trial of the three soldiers, who are accused of running over 14 demonstrators using Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs), will begin on January 8. The decision to charge them with manslaughter and not murder, despite video footage depicting APC's being driven into crowds as gunners fired at the unarmed civilians, has been met with anger by human rights activists and members of the Coptic community. There is also anger at the fact that no-one has been held responsible for the deaths of the remaining victims, most of whom died from gunshot wounds, despite subsequent denials by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that its troops had used live ammunition.

In a statement issued to the press, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) pointed out that the "Military judiciary ignored 14 martyrs shot by live ammunition including martyr Mina Daniel and charged the three soldiers with manslaughter, which lacks the minimum level of guarantees for seriousness and justice in a fair trial. It is a continuation of the trend of the ruling military council of denying any responsibility for the crime."

The court case is the latest in apparent concessions by the ruling military council in the wake of a growing backlash against the tactics it has deployed during successive attacks on unarmed civilians.

In the lead up to the November elections, an attack on protesters in Tahrir Square sparked off several days of violence in which at least 40 people were killed and over 2000 injured. Video and still footage highlighted brutal military tactics, including the excessive use of teargas, protestors' faces being targeted with buck shot, causing several to lose eyes, and people being beaten despite being unconscious.

Violence in December, sparked by a particularly brutal assault on a member of a crowd that had been peacefully protesting outside parliament for almost a month, further tarnished the army's image. Video and still footage of soldiers throwing chairs, china, a filing cabinet and other missiles on to the crowds from the parliamentary building, firing live rounds directly at protesters, making obscene gestures and assaulting men and women who offered no resistance tarnished the army's reputation further. Particularly damaging was video footage of the death of Emad Effat, a senior al Azhar sheikh killed by a gun fired apparently at close range, and of soldiers stripping, kicking and beating a young woman in a hijab, and raining blows on the head of a second woman after pushing her to the ground.

After thousands of women marched in Cairo and Alexandria in protest at the treatment of women by the armed forces, SCAF issued a belated expression of regret, offering to bring those responsible for inflicting forcible "virginity tests" on several female protesters earlier this year to trial, and later releasing prominent blogger and activist Alaa Abd El Fattah, who along with 27 others, had been detained on charges of killing a soldier, stealing military weapons and destroying property during the Maspero violence, and was the only one remaining in jail. On 27 December, in a ruling on a case brought by one of the women who had endured a forcible "virginity test",

the army's use of these tests on female detainees was declared unlawful by an administrative court, which added that the military had violated the human rights of female demonstrators in order to humiliate them.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide said, "While there remains a pressing need to prosecute those responsible for the deaths of unarmed protesters at Maspero and during the two subsequent episodes of violence, the manslaughter charges against the three soldiers belie the brutal and unprovoked nature of the attack by the army on a crowd of peaceful civilians, giving the impression that their actions were accidental or negligent. Video evidence would appear to support eyewitness testimonies that the APCs deliberately drove into the crowd, at times mounting pavements in order to injure people. In addition, the footage supports reports that the army deployed heavy artillery without provocation against civilians in Maspero, with the intent of causing serious harm. We continue to call for a full, independent, judicial enquiry into the murder at Maspero, including an investigation of the allegedly inciting role played by state media. The current charges have the appearance of a half-hearted attempt to placate public opinion in the wake of the almost universal condemnation of SCAF for tactics utilised during the recent violence in Cairo. They do not inspire any confidence and instead seem to indicate that the military is unwilling to ensure true justice is done in this or any other case involving the deaths of civilians at the hands of the army."