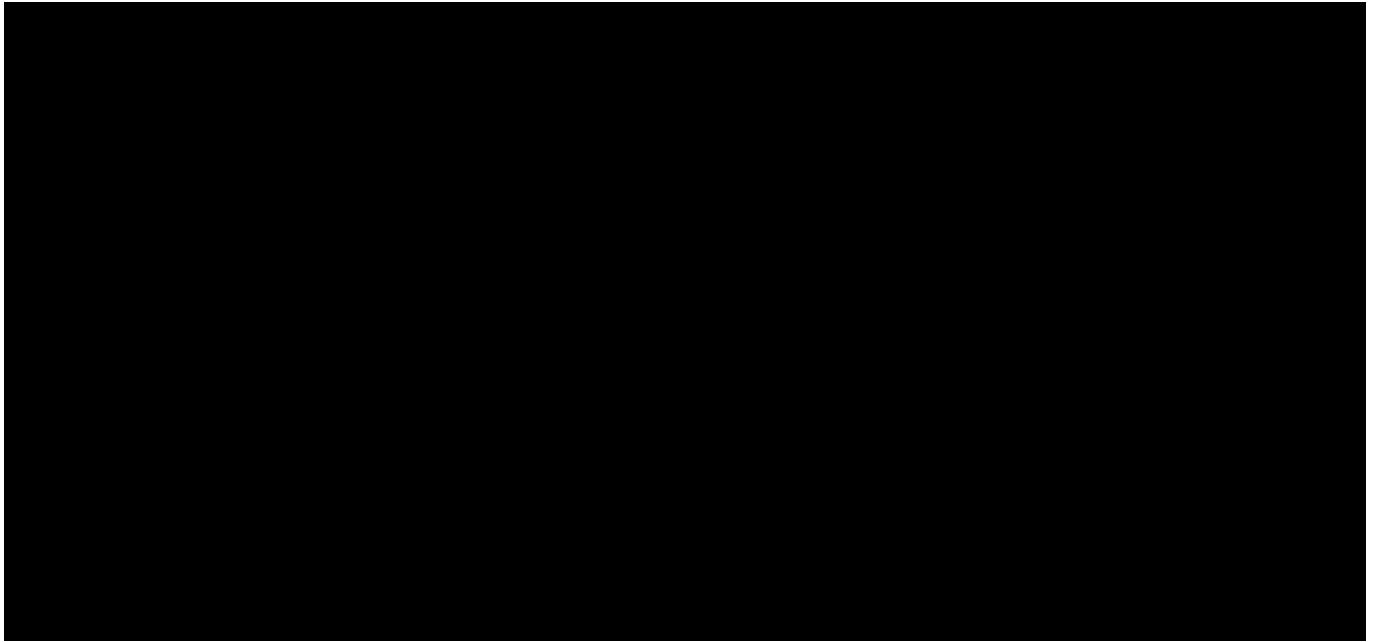


Perversion of justice – 25 face jail in Egypt



An Egyptian military court sentenced 25 members of the opposition Muslim Brotherhood to jail on Tuesday – a verdict described by Amnesty International as a “perversion of justice”.

“This trial appeared to be politically motivated from the start, when President Mubarak sent the defendants for trial before a military court despite an earlier civilian court ruling that some of them should be released,” said Amnesty International.

“Today’s sentences leave little doubt that the Egyptian authorities are determined to undermine what has become the main opposition group in the country.”

The military court in Haikstip, northern Cairo, handed down prison sentences of up to 10 years against 25 defendants, including seven who are not in custody and who were tried in absentia. Fifteen other defendants were acquitted but are yet to be released.

Khairat al-Shatir, the third highest ranking Muslim Brotherhood leader, and Hassan Malek, received seven years’ imprisonment. Sixteen others received prison sentences ranging from three to five years. Five of those who were tried in absentia received 10 year prison terms, while the other two each received five year sentences.

The defendants were all tried on terrorism-related and money laundering charges, which they denied. Specifically, they were alleged to have financed a banned organization and provided students with weapons and military training. They can appeal to the Supreme Court of Military Appeals, but this can only examine procedural matters, not the substance of the case.

The verdict, which had been postponed twice, came amid reports that some 200 Muslim Brotherhood supporters, including relatives of the defendants, were detained by security forces when they sought to enter the military compound in which the court was located.

Security forces prevented human rights observers and the media from entering the court and prohibited the presence of defence lawyers, other than the head of the defendants' legal team.

Thousands of security forces were reported to have been deployed on the route to the court compounds in Haikstip, as well as on the main routes leading to Cairo centre, in an attempt to prevent any demonstrations against the military court's verdict.

The highly publicised trial of the 40 men – all of whom are civilians – opened on 26 April 2007, after President Mubarak ordered in February 2007 that they should be tried before a military court. Earlier, a civilian court threw out charges against 17 of them.

During the trial, international observers sent by Amnesty International and other organisations were prevented from attending.

“Trying civilians before military courts, whose judges are serving members of the military, flouts international standards of fair trial and is inherently unjust, regardless of whether the defendants are allowed a right of appeal or not.” said Amnesty International. “All of those convicted should be promptly retried by a civilian court that conforms to international fair trial standards, or else released.”