

Alexandria torture trial postponed

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The case of a man with special needs who claims he was tortured by police has been adjourned once again.

Ragai Mohammad Mounir, a 47-year-old man with special needs, was walking along Alexandria's Cornishe last summer when he was arrested by police for reasons that remain unclear. His brother later found him on a hospital bed suffering from major injuries to his skull and left shoulder. Medical reports say the injuries resulted in permanent damage.

Mounir filed a lawsuit accusing Colonel Akram Soliman of arresting him without cause and for beating him up in the police station following his arrest. Soliman, however, counter-charged that Mounir had been walking with a woman who was "wearing tight clothes and whose manners were noticeable," according to the arrest report. Lawyers working on human rights cases in general -- and torture cases in particular -- say the scenario is a familiar one.

"Even if he was walking in the street with a girl who looked abnormal, no laws prohibit that," defense lawyer Abdel Aziz Ghoneim told the judge. According to colonel's defense team, the woman in question later testified that Mounir had been trying to offer her money in exchange for sexual favors. "How could he have been able to strike a deal with her when he is a man with special needs?" asked Ghoneim. The woman was later released by the prosecutor.

Soliman's lawyers also allege that Mounir's injuries were the result of a fall while trying to escape arrest. "How can we believe that he could run so fast when his movement is naturally slow?" asked Ghoneim. "How could this fall result in so many injuries to different parts of his body?"

"This is very common," said Haytham Muhammadein, a lawyer with the Cairo-based Al-Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims. "The police avoid punishment by forging accusations against claimants," he said, citing similar examples. Human rights watchdogs have described torture in Egypt as "a consistent practice."

Mounir's lawyers gave further testimony that their client was tortured while in police custody. "When he was transferred to the Gamal Abdel Nasser Hospital, the man who put him there left without giving any details," said Mohammad Abdul Aziz, another lawyer for Mounir. "When Ragai's brother went around looking for him, why didn't police call his family to tell them that he had been arrested on prostitution charges?"

At the request of Soliman's defense team, the case was ultimately adjourned pending interrogation of forensic authorities and two other witnesses.

At the beginning of the hearing, Mounir's older brother Elhamy provided testimonial. After his brother went missing, he said, he went looking for him in local police stations and hospitals. "When I found him in a hospital, he was too scared to say what happened. I told him you have to speak up because we have law in this country and you have to get your rights," he said in his testimonial. "He then said that he had been beaten up and accurately described Akram Ismail."

When Mounir asked his brother who had beat him, the latter gave him Soliman's name. And when he asked him how he knew the colonel's name, he said, "When he was beating me up, people in the room told him: 'Akram Pasha, stop, he will die by your hand.'" Mounir also noted that his brother's description of

the assaults were consistent with the forensic report.

Upon the judge's request, Mounir explained that his brother's low IQ did not constitute grounds to dismiss his account of what happened. "His mental age is not as advanced as his actual age. That means that he cannot pursue academic studies. But in daily life, he is totally conscious, like an 8-year-old child," said Mounir, who is himself a pediatrician by profession.

On approaching one of Soliman's lawyers at the end of the hearing, Al-Masry Al-Youm English Edition was told, "If you are press, then our team won't speak to you." During the hearing, the defendant followed the deliberations anxiously from the dock.

At the doorsteps of the court overlooking the Corniche, a crowd of about 20 people carried signs reading "no to torture." They began chanting "Down with Mubarak," "Down with the National Democratic Party" and "Who is our security protecting?" Their chants attracted the attention of passers-by, some of whom stopped to ask the reason for the protest. One demonstrator answered, "It isn't just about this one torture case -- it's a long story."

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