

**Buried alive:
Trapped by poverty and neglect in Cairo's informal settlements**



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The fatal 6 September 2008 rockslide in Al-Duwayqa took place along a scarp about 140 metres long and 25 metres wide. According to the National Authority for Remote Sensing and Space Sciences (NARSSS), the boulders that cascaded down on the communities below weighed at least 18,000 tons and affected more than 6,500 square metres. Residents say that about half of the 97 buildings officially counted by NARSSS as destroyed – using satellite images – were two- or three-storey brick houses.²⁶ The rest were small rooms, most located near the wall of the hill. A few buildings had a dozen or so rooms, each hosting on average a family of four to five.

MANSHIYET NASSER INFORMAL SETTLEMENT

Al-Duwayqa and Ezbet Bekhit, which were directly affected by the rockslide, are both in Manshiyet Nasser, one of Egypt's largest informal settlements, hosting around a million people. Residents are mainly Cairo's urban poor and internal migrants from the southern governorates. Most work in the informal sector as artisans, street vendors, construction workers or rubbish collectors, or as daily wage labourers (orzoqi).²⁷

The residents of Manshiyet Nasser are squatting on state-owned land in desert and not designated for urban settlement. They have been building there and introducing water, sewerage and electricity in an informal way since the 1960s. The government also built official shelters and popular housing there.

Despite the 2006 decrees (see above), basic services in Al-Duwayqa are still mainly provided informally.

Residents connect themselves to water pipes and electricity lines. They buy drinking water. They dig holes to remove dirty water.

Upgrading projects in Manshiyet Nasser officially started in 1998 in partnership with GTZ, a German cooperation agency for sustainable development, which has a participatory urban development programme in Cairo. The Manshiyet Nasser Youth Centre, an open-air theatre and a library were inaugurated within this framework, with participation of young people from Manshiyet Nasser.

Children generally go to state schools and residents receive basic health care in public hospitals in Al-Hussein and old Cairo, or from medical caravans. Community-based organizations also provide services such as credit, entertainment for children, awareness-raising for teenagers and literacy classes for women.

CAIRO GOVERNORATE

Rescue efforts were hindered by the scale of the disaster and the inaccessibility of Ezbet Bekhit. The site of the disaster was trapped between the hill and a 10-metre-high stone structure built to support a railway no longer in use, which barred the passage of large equipment needed to move the boulders.²⁸

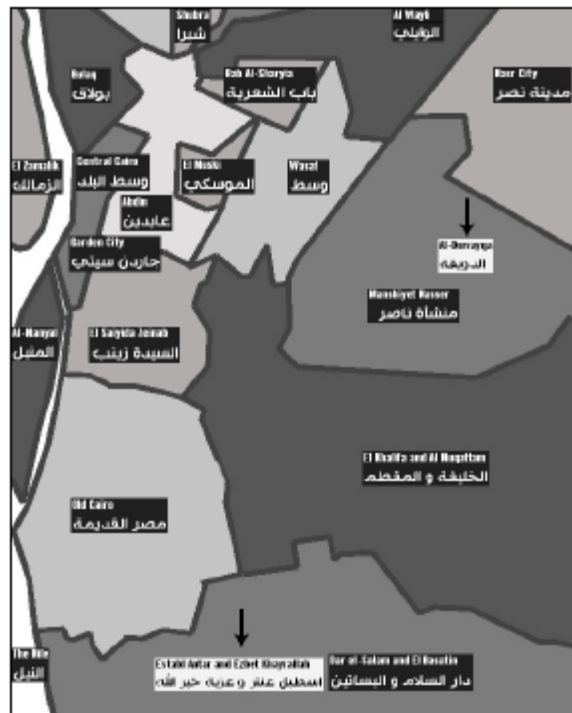
Officials from local authorities and central government mobilized their resources to deal with the disaster, as did humanitarian and other organizations. Security forces and riot police cordoned off the disaster zone, apparently aiming to prevent the media from reporting further on the survivors' anger at the authorities. A few clashes broke out when the security forces attempted to remove people from the area.

According to reports, 25 people were rescued on the first day. The injured were taken to Al-Hussein and Al-Zahraa hospitals. The Egyptian Red Crescent established a shelter in Manshiyet Nasser Youth Centre, as did the Egyptian army in the nearby Al-Fustat garden.

Bodies were transported to a morgue in Zenhoun neighbourhood for identification and collection by relatives.

On the second day the army and the Arab Contractors company broke through the railway structure, but the boulders continued to hinder rescuers. The security cordon was tightened and prevented the media as well as charitable and civil society organizations from reaching the disaster site and the shelters. Charities distributed food, water, clothes and education kits in Manshiyet Nasser with the help of community-based organizations such as the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women.

On 8 September 2008, the Egyptian Centre for Housing Rights²⁹ organized a candle-lit demonstration in Talat Harb Square in central Cairo to mourn those who had died in the rockslide. It was forcibly dispersed by security forces and protesters were beaten. A couple of weeks later some of Al-Duwayqa's residents along with civil society organizations and political activists organized a sit-in at the Cairo Governorate building in central Cairo. The protest was dispersed by riot police on the dawn of its third day. The police forced some protesters – who were claiming alternative housing – into small buses and drove them back to Manshiyet Nasser.



Source: Greater Cairo Utility Data Centre

Survivors of the disaster believe that many bodies remain buried in Al-Duwayqa. When an Amnesty International delegation visited the site in February 2009 the authorities had already flattened the area, so the true death toll may never be known.

Ahmed Gharib Hamed, a 36-year-old bricklayer and father of three children, lost eight relatives in Ezbet Bekhit during the Al-Duwayqa rockslide: two brothers, three sisters, the wife of his brother Ramadan and her two children. He was rescued by survivors and then saved his six-year-old son Fares, who was wrapped in a mattress. Over the next couple of days he found the bodies of his relatives. All the survivors are deeply traumatized.

Ahmed Gharib Hamed told Amnesty International that he had lived all his life in the family's two-storey house that had been built without permission.³⁰ His family also owned a grocery shop and had been paying property taxes on both properties. They received a total of EGP3,000 (US\$542) as compensation for their injuries, but nothing for the shop. His mother received EGP5,000 compensation for each of her children who died.

After the rockslide, Ahmed Gharib Hamed was allocated a flat in the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings. However, he has no legal security of tenure as he did not receive any documents confirming that he could rent or buy the flat, or stating for how long he could live there. His mother and surviving brothers also received flats. Ahmed Gharib Hamed told Amnesty International: "We want the site of the rockslide to become a memorial for the martyrs still buried there. It is a painful memory for us."

Since the 1990s, geological studies by official bodies had warned of the dangers posed by Al-Muqattam Hill, which is made of clay and layers of limestone. After the Al-Zabalyn rock fall in 1993, which killed 70 people, national research bodies identified danger zones in Manshiyet Nasser. A joint study in 1997 by the NARSSS and the Geology Survey Authority established a map of areas at risk of rock falls, rockslides and flooding. One of the areas was that devastated by the 6 September 2008 rockslide.

An accumulation of sewerage and chemicals resulting from the decomposition of rubbish left on the hill is believed to have caused the clay to expand, putting pressure on the layers of limestone and eventually resulting in the rockslide. Some experts believe that quarrying by individual contractors on Al-Muqattam Hill also affected its stability.

Despite the 1993 rock fall and the studies that followed, informal building in Ezbet Bekhit continued, some of it no more than 200 metres from the headquarters of the Manshiyet Nasser Neighbourhood Authority. In March 2008 the local authorities classified the rocks up on the hill as high risk, a designation that suggests the authorities should treat the situation as a priority.

Instead, the authorities took only limited steps. About four months before the disaster, local authorities hired a local contractor to secure the rocks. The contractor told

Amnesty International that when he started the work, he foresaw the danger of a rockslide and warned the local authorities repeatedly. Rocks also fell during this period, injuring people. The authorities did not pass on these warnings fully to the affected communities or evacuate them. The contractor said official geology experts estimated that the residents of Ezbet Bekhit living as near as 160 metres from the hill's wall were in danger. The Cairo Governor stated after the rockslide that the expert's estimate was of 30 metres only.³¹

It is difficult to establish how much information the local authorities gave to the victims when the danger of rockslide became higher. According to a Cairo Governorate advisor, by July-August 2008 the Governorate had ordered the eviction of 60 families from up the hill (who were not affected by the rockslide) as well as 30 families from lower down the hill, a fraction of those who were later affected by the rockslide. The advisor said the families had refused alternative housing offered to them in Al-Nahda City, about 35 kilometres north-east of Cairo, because it was too far from their sources of livelihood. Official declarations after the rockslide did not suggest that all the victims were offered temporary housing, but instead described them as unlucky because they were about to be relocated to the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings.³² Police reportedly made some people sign a statement declaring that they were staying in the area at their own risk; among them were subsequent victims of the rockslide. According to the Egyptian Center for Housing Rights, the victims would have moved into the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings if this option had been put to them and consultation had taken place; offers to relocate residents temporarily to distant areas would have been rejected because residents would have presumed that this would make resettlement in the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings unlikely.

A few days before the rockslide, local authorities warned residents in Ezbet Bekhit to move out or face eviction, according to some survivors. But they were not offered alternative housing or even temporary shelters, so in effect had nowhere to go. In the end, no one was evicted nor was any attempt made to evacuate the area, even though the nearby and newly constructed Suzanne Mubarak dwellings were available (although the final touches to the flats had apparently not been completed). The residents were warned by workers to leave their homes from 8am until 4pm on working days for their security, as work continued uphill.

Many of the residents, particularly women who were caring for children, could not stay out of their homes for eight hours a day. The authorities treated the warnings with nonchalance and the population with fatalism.

Meanwhile, residents in Al-Duwayqa on the other side of the hill had been telling local authorities that they were afraid that their homes would collapse because there were more and more cracks appearing in their walls. About a month before the fatal rock fall, families living in Abu Bakr Al-Seddiq Street in Al-Duwayqa, aided by the Egyptian Centre for Housing Rights, filed a complaint with the office of the Public Prosecutor about the local authorities' inaction. They called for a risk assessment to be undertaken

and for alternative housing. The office of the Public Prosecutor took their testimonies but the case was closed.

Although none of these families was affected by the rockslide, full investigation into their complaint might have provided further warning about the dangers in the area.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN EGYPT

According to the Law on Local Government of 1979, Governors in Egypt are representatives of the President and oversee implementation of state policies at local level. With the Ministry of the Interior, they are responsible for security and are mandated to propose solutions to the Ministry to face disasters, including natural disasters. Together, they oversee civil defence and fire fighters. Local authorities have the power to take all necessary measures to offer shelter and rehouse people in situations of disasters and provide other relief. The local authorities implement laws and rules on building and demolition.

According to the Law on Building of 2008, local authorities have the power to send expert engineering committees to assess the danger of collapsing buildings to protect lives and property. These can recommend repair or demolition. In both cases the local authorities can issue an administrative eviction order. The Law on Building specifically says that in cases of imminent danger the local authorities must evict the residents and their neighbours if needed, and take all other appropriate measures. In cases where the building is at imminent risk of collapsing, they must immediately evacuate the residents and may demolish the building after obtaining an urgent order from the court. These residents may receive alternative housing.

In the case of Al-Duwayqa, the authorities did not follow this law. Long after they became aware of the risks posed by the instability of the ground, they failed to arrange for the needed expert evaluation, did not take measures for the temporary evacuation or permanent eviction of residents, and did not provide residents of Ezbet Bekhit with alternative housing in order to offer them protection after becoming aware of the danger of the rockslide.

In September 2008 Egypt's Public Prosecutor opened investigations into allegations of negligence and the failure of the authorities to act in time to prevent deaths. Soon after, the contractor hired by the local authorities to secure the hill was arrested by the police and investigated. He was subsequently released without charge.

Senior officials from the Cairo Governorate and Manshiyet Nasser Neighbourhood Authority were investigated. It was reported that they might face a charge of involuntary homicide. The injured also gave their testimonies while in hospital.³³ However, at the time of writing in September 2009, nobody has been charged or brought to court in relation to the rockslide.

In February 2009, the Public Prosecutor told Amnesty International that investigations into the rockslide had found that there were administrative errors and negligence leading to delays in moving the population.³⁴ He said that the authorities had tried to resolve the problem of residents building their homes in a dangerous place, but that people had refused to move because they were not offered alternative housing, or the alternative was inadequate in their view.

Gamal Mohamed Hassan, a 48-year-old labourer, told Amnesty International that his brother Hassan Mohamed Hassan and his three children, his two sisters-in-law, and the sister-in-law of his brother Hassan had all been killed in the rockslide.³⁵ The bodies of his brother's sister-in-law and one of his children were not found.

Gamal Mohamed Hassan's arm and leg were injured, and his wife and two children suffered leg injuries.

Gamal Mohamed Hassan says he had lived in Ezbet Bekhit all his life. He informally built a block of three rooms, one of which he rented, and had a small grocery shop.

He was allocated a flat in the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings and moved there about a week after the rockslide. His family received EGP4,000 (approximately US\$720) in total as compensation for their injuries. He said his injuries affected his capacity to work, and now his children sort and clean corn at home and his wife sells it in the street. His mother-in-law, Sayyeda Abdel Salam, a former hospital employee and widow whose flat was destroyed in the rockslide, now lives with her son Yasser in the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings. She explained to Amnesty International that this makes it hard for her married daughters to stay with her as they did previously when they had disputes with their husbands.

As a state party to the ICCPR and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, Egypt has an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the right to life. The UN Human Rights Committee has stated that "the right to life has been too often narrowly interpreted. The expression 'inherent right to life' cannot properly be understood in a restrictive manner, and the protection of this right requires that States adopt positive measures."³⁶

While governments cannot be held responsible for every situation in which lives are lost because of natural or other disasters, where the authorities have information indicating that there is a real and immediate threat to lives, they should take all necessary measures that could be reasonably expected to prevent or avoid such risks. The right to life also requires states authorities to carry out independent and effective investigations when there are reasons to believe that a violation of the right to life has occurred.

In the case of the Al-Duwayqa tragedy, despite warnings by scientists, by people living in Manshiyet Nasser and by the contractor hired to secure the rocks on the hill, the government failed to evacuate people from the area, provide them with temporary or other adequate alternative housing or give them full information on the possible dangers posed by the hill.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE: RELOCATION OF SURVIVORS

“Will they give us contracts for the flats or throw us in the street? We need to know what will happen to us.”

Azza Sobhy Abdel Salam

Most survivors of the rockslide were relocated to the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings within a few days and are staying there without charge. This positive move was marred, however, by the failure of the authorities to provide the survivors with documents or other guarantees of even a minimum degree of security of tenure. As a result, they live in constant fear that they will be evicted at some point in the future. There were also allegations of irregularities and corruption during the allocation process.

The Suzanne Mubarak dwellings are named after Egypt’s first lady, who sponsors upgrading projects in Al-Duwayqa and elsewhere in Cairo. The Al-Duwayqa project was initiated in 1998

with funds from the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development to build 10,000 flats.³⁷ The Ministry of Housing, Utilities and Urban Development executes the construction of the buildings while the local authorities oversee the allocation of flats to beneficiaries.

According to a Cairo Governorate source, 3,662 flats in the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings had been allocated by 2008 as part of the Al-Duwayqa upgrading project, and the families had moved in. A further 2,000 flats were expected to be finished by the end of September 2008.

The Minister of Housing, Utilities and Urban Development suggested that the victims of the rockslide were just about to be relocated to these flats but that “fate” intervened.³⁸

The Cairo Governorate reportedly requested the flats from the Ministry of Housing five months before the rockslide, but it is unclear whether the flats were going to be allocated to Ezbet Bekhit residents or to other people in Al-Duwayqa. Neither the survivors nor people who continue to live in Ezbet Bekhit interviewed by Amnesty International knew that they were about to be moved to the 2,000 flats in the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings.³⁹

After the rockslide, priority was given to those affected by the disaster. Zaynab Al-Shahat Mohamed Khedr, a divorced mother of four grown-up children, survived the rockslide. She told Amnesty International that she and her daughter Hoda, a divorced mother of four, stayed 17 days at the site of the rockslide – searching for survivors - before being allocated a flat each in the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings.⁴⁰ Her daughter Ghada, a divorced mother of two, and her son Essam, who has mental health problems, did not get a flat.

Zaynab Al-Shahat Mohamed Khedr, who now sells grilled corn, said that she moved to Ezbet Bekhit to avoid her former husband, who used to attack her while selling

vegetables in the Cairo market of Rod Al-Farag. He could not accept the idea of having a son with a disability and she was divorced in the 1980s.

In the days following the rockslide, shock and confusion prevailed. Anyone who said they had survived was admitted into the Egyptian Red Crescent shelter. Reports by official bodies and survivors suggest that some of those in the shelters were actually from neighbourhoods in old Cairo who wanted to be allocated a flat in the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings.

Corruption by local officials was also reported. An official from Manshiyet Nasser Neighbourhood Authority was arrested on 13 September 2008 for adding names of relatives to the list of people affected by the rockslide.⁴¹ Local political figures reportedly sold letters recommending people for alternative housing.

By 10 September the relocation process had started. People were given housing letters and flats at the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings. Housing letters state the name of the beneficiary and the circumstances of the loss of the original home. They are signed by the enumeration committee official and addressed to the housing department at the governorate. These letters were retrieved by the Neighbourhood Authority once people moved into their new flat, leaving them without any documentary proof of the allocation. Those who did not receive a flat and did not want to leave the Egyptian Red Crescent shelter were reported to have been forcibly removed by riot police.

By the end of October 2008, a deputy governor of Cairo said that 1,783 families had been allocated flats. This number includes those who were evicted from homes deemed unsafe because of the rockslide.⁴²

More flats were allocated to people who were evacuated from their homes because they were living in areas considered to be unsafe during the following months. By mid-March 2009, some 4,005 flats had been assigned.⁴³

Arafat Hassan Mustafa and his wife Aisha, their three children, one son-in-law and one granddaughter were evicted from their house on 8 September 2008 along with 35 other families in Ezbet Al-Arab area near Al-Duwayqa. Without warning, security forces surrounded the area, counted the residents and forced them out of their homes. The families were given no time to take their possessions and did not know where they were being relocated.

Arafat Hassan Mustafa's family was moved to the shelter in Manshiyet Nasser Youth Centre, where they stayed for nearly a week before being given a two-bedroom flat in the Suzanne Mubarak dwellings. The authorities told Arafat Hassan Mustafa that his home had to be demolished to allow the demolition of another home deemed unsafe on the hill.

Arafat Hassan Mustafa has no document for the flat he currently lives in. When Amnesty International met him, he was not having to pay rent or electricity and water

bills.⁴⁴ This situation made him feel insecure. He appealed to the Neighbourhood Authority in November 2008 requesting additional flats for his married and divorced daughters. Given their new situation, his son Hassan had to postpone his wedding. He works as a tailor's assistant and became the breadwinner of the family after his father suffered slipped discs.

As highlighted below, forced evictions left many families homeless because their names did not appear on the list of people to be allocated a flat, often because of irregularities in the work of enumeration committees.

In some cases, divorced women – often with children – were not counted as a separate family unit so were rehoused with their parents or other family members.

ENUMERATION COMMITTEES

Enumeration committees are usually made up of officials from the Neighbourhood Authority and may also include an official from the governorate. Their function is to count and list the population of a given area.

These lists are then used to allocate alternative housing.

However, the committees do not appear to have written criteria for identifying residents, and the officials use their discretion to assess whether or not somebody actually does live in the area or are only pretending to do so to benefit from alternative housing. It has been reported that enumeration committees look to see if kitchen utensils have been used and food is present – and even check for women's underwear at their place.

Official documents required to prove the exact place of residency in these informal settlements seem to have been informally established by the local authorities, but these often fail to provide the exact address of the bearer. While visiting Haret Ahmed Nader and Al-Shohba area in Al-Duwayqa, Amnesty International received from residents lists of recognized official documents handwritten on A4 paper without any signature, date or indication of their originators.⁴⁵ These were given to them by enumeration committee employees. Such documents include an identity card; a birth certificate, vaccination card or letter from the school for children; a court decision or a police report; a driving licence; electricity or water bills; a food rations card; a certificate for paying property tax; a marriage or divorce certificate; and proxy papers for women whose husband is absent or whose father is gravely ill.

Some of these are clearly discriminatory against women, particularly those who are separated. Al-Duwayqa residents told Amnesty International that women whose husbands have left them but who remain married are invariably left homeless. Women should not be discriminated in the allocation of housing.⁴⁶

Even identity cards do not always provide the exact place of residence. In fact, many people would rather not have Al-Duwayqa on their identity card in order to avoid stigmatization and police suspicion at checkpoints.

Residents often cite their previous address, for example in another Cairo neighbourhood or their province of birth.

Since 6 September 2008 the Ministry of Interior has not issued new identity cards which cite an address in Manshiyet Nasser, apparently to prevent the holders from claiming alternative housing. No formal decision was published in the Egyptian official journal and it is unclear how long this situation will continue. Only those who want to renew their old identity card – with the same address in Manshiyet Nasser – are issued a new card.

A group of women from Al-Duwayqa told Amnesty International that because they cannot get identity cards it has become more difficult for them to obtain a pension, take exams for literacy classes, register children in schools, or receive birth certificates with their place of residence in Manshiyet Nasser.⁴⁷ Generally, identity cards are necessary for such administrative issues. Each citizen is expected to show his/her identity card if requested by official authorities, otherwise they can be arrested and fined. The cards are also needed for accessing high education, employment or to participate in elections. The current practice of refusing to issue new identity cards discriminates against the residents of Manshiyet Nasser and negatively impacts on their enjoyment of their civil and political rights as well as their economic, social and cultural rights.

Endnotes:

27 For background information on Manshiyet Nasser, see: Hanaa Al Gohary, Applied Studies in Urban Development, Dar Al-Marefa Al-Gameiya, 2006, pp180-235.

28 For more on rescue efforts, see: Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, Marginalised in Informal Settlements...Dead or Alive, Al-Duwayqa Opens the Fire Anew, 2008, pp12-16.

29 The Egyptian Center for Housing Rights campaigns for the right to adequate housing for the poor and fights against forced evictions. The center provides free legal help to victims of forced evictions and residents in informal settlements who claim alternative housing. It also conducts research on the right to adequate housing in Egypt. The center was established in 1998 and registered as a civil company under Egyptian law. After the adoption of the new Law on Associations (Law 84 of 2002) the Egyptian Center for Housing Rights applied for registration to the Ministry of Social Solidarity in 2003. The registration application was rejected under Article 11 of the law, which disqualifies from registration associations whose activities “threaten national unity”, “have political activities” or “aim at making profits”. The center appealed against the decision before an administrative court and awaits its decision.

30 Amnesty International interviews, 9 August 2009.

31 Al-Ahram daily newspaper, “The Governor of Cairo in a Frank Confrontation on Al-Duwayqa Disaster: Fate was Faster Than Us”, 15 September 2008.

32 Ibid.

33 Al-Masry Al-Youm daily newspaper, “The Public Prosecutor Follows the Investigations and Prosecution West Forms a Committee to Investigate the Causes of the Rockslide”, 7 September 2008.

34 Amnesty International meeting with the Public Prosecutor, 11 February 2009.

35 Amnesty International interviews, 9 August 2009.

36 General Comment Number 6, 30 April 1982, available at

[http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/84ab9690ccd81fc7c12563ed0046fae3?Opendocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/84ab9690ccd81fc7c12563ed0046fae3?Opendocument), para 5. 2008, p28.

38 Masrawy.com, “In Parliamentary Debates on Al-Duwayqa event: Sorour expected it and Maghraby Accuses Fate”, 11 September 2008, available at:

<http://www.masrawy.com/News/Egypt/Politics/2008/september/11/doigaacoll.aspx> (last accessed on 3 October 2009).

39 Amnesty International focus group discussions, 9 August 2009 and 16 August 2009.

40 Amnesty International interviews, 9 August 2009.

41 Al-Masry Al-Youm daily newspaper, "Detention of an Employee of Manshiyet Nasser Neighbourhood for Adding the Names of Relatives in Lists of Al-Duwayqa Victims to Receive Flats", 14 September 2008.

42 Al-Masry Al-Youm daily newspaper, "Cairo: Completion of the rehousing of 1783 Al-Duwayqa families... And a Plan to Develop Transport in the Area", 24 October 2008.

43 Al-Badil newspaper, Cairo Governor: 18 Feddans evacuated in Al-Duwayqa and walled to prevent infringements, 18 March 2009.

44 Amnesty International interviews, 9 August 2009.

45 Ibid.

28 May 2010

City officials convicted over deadly Cairo rockslide

City officials convicted over deadly Cairo rockslide



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Amnesty International has welcomed the holding to account of eight Cairo city officials convicted of negligence over the deaths of at least 119 people in a rockslide that hit a Cairo slum in September 2008.

All eight defendants, including a vice-governor of the Egyptian capital, were sentenced to jail terms on Wednesday for involuntarily causing deaths and injuries through negligence in connection with the fatal rockslide in Al-Duwayqa, east Cairo. All eight remain free on bail, until an appeal court rules in the case.

The court found that Cairo's local authorities knew of the risks in the area, meaning the deaths could have been prevented. If the sentences are upheld by the appeal court, the victims of the rockslide and their families will be able to claim compensation.

Some of them received the verdict with joy, proclaiming "Long live justice". Others expressed frustration that the officials found culpable remain free.

Amnesty International had been campaigning for justice for the victims of the Al-Duwayqa rockslide, and for the evacuation of thousands of poor residents who are forced to live in inadequate and unsafe housing in unstable hillside locations.

The Egyptian Centre for Housing Rights, which acted as a civil party in the trial, said the sentences would not have happened without Amnesty International's pressure.

"The prosecution of the Cairo city officials represents a major step towards justice for the victims of the Al-Duwayqa

rockslide,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“We hope it spurs the Egyptian authorities into taking further action to ensure that all people currently living in dangerous areas around Cairo are properly protected in the future.”

The Manshiyet Nasser Court of Misdemeanours sentenced the vice-governor of Cairo to five years in prison. The seven other defendants were sentenced to three years’ imprisonment.

They include the head of Manshiyet Nasser Neighbourhood Authority at the time of the rockslide and his predecessor, along with five other employees responsible for building, housing and monitoring rockslide risks in the area.

Amnesty International called for the protection of residents of “unsafe areas” in Cairo in its November 2009 report Buried Alive: Trapped by poverty and neglect in Cairo’s informal settlements. The following month, the Public Prosecutor indicted the eight officials and referred them to court to stand trial.

The court ruled out requests from lawyers acting for the defence and civil parties to hold higher officials accountable and call the Governor of Cairo and the former Minister of Housing, Utilities and Urban Development as defendants.

The rockslide crashed down the Al-Muqattam Hill onto the Ezbet Bekhit informal settlement in Manshiyet Nasser neighbourhood on 6 September 2008.

Twenty-six areas in Greater Cairo have been identified as “unsafe” by a government master plan to develop the city by 2050. In March 2010, Cairo authorities estimated that 17,600 families were living in imminent danger of death in Manshiyet Nasser alone. About 6,300 families from the neighbourhood have been relocated to alternative housing since the rockslide of 2008, although in many cases there were concerns that they had been forcibly evicted.

“The Al-Duwayqa tragedy was a disaster waiting to happen,” said Philip Luther. “The Egyptian authorities owe it to both the victims and those who survived that awful morning to ensure that such a tragedy can never happen again.”

22 September 2010

Egypt urged to protect slum-dwellers after rockslide official acquitted

Egypt urged to protect slum-dwellers after rockslide official acquitted



Amnesty International has called for decisive and inclusive action to protect people living in slums in Egypt after a senior Cairo city official was cleared of negligence over the deaths of at least 119 people in a rockslide in September 2008.

A vice-governor of Cairo and a local authority employee had their sentences for causing deaths and injuries through negligence quashed by a Cairo appeal court on Tuesday.

Six other local officials, including the head of Manshiyet Nasser Neighbourhood Authority at the time of the rockslide and one of his predecessors, had their sentences reduced to one year. The eight had been convicted in May.

At least 119 people were killed and 55 were injured in the rockslide in Ezbet Bekhit informal settlement, in Manshiyet Nasser, east Cairo, in spite of attempts by the residents and experts to alert the authorities of the risk.

"This ruling provides some answers but not the full truth to the survivors of the rockslide. It is a missed opportunity to ensure the right to an effective remedy is guaranteed for those living at risk in Egypt's informal settlements and to ensure that officials act promptly to protect the lives of thousands of families living in Egypt's 'unsafe areas'," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, deputy director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa programme.

"Only decisive action by Egyptian authorities in consultation with communities at risk can avert further disaster."

Ahmed Gharib Hamed, a survivor who lost eight relatives in the rockslide told Amnesty International: "The engineers deserved a greater punishment because they knew of the mountain's danger... As well we wanted the big people who sit in their comfortable office [to be punished]...We hoped from God that all of them will be punished".

On 26 May 2010, the Manshiyet Nasser Court of Misdemeanours sentenced the vice-governor of Cairo to five years in prison. The seven other defendants were each sentenced to three years' imprisonment. They all remained free on bail pending appeal.

An investigation by the public prosecution found that local officials had been warned about the danger of a rockslide by expert reports in 2007 and 2008. These reports had recommended that residents be evacuated for their safety.

Survivors of the rockslide and relatives of those who died or were injured can now file compensation cases before civil courts for physical harm. However, those who lost their homes after they were evacuated from the area where the rockslide took place are not able to seek civil compensation.

Amnesty International has campaigned for justice for the victims of the Al-Duwayqa rockslide and for the evacuation of thousands of poor residents who are forced to live in inadequate and unsafe housing in unstable hillside locations.

Such forced evictions have led to many people being left homeless or receiving only inadequate alternative housing. No consultations over resettlement have been carried out, while evictees don't get prior notice of eviction or told whether they will be provided with alternative housing.

"A full remedy requires Egyptian authorities to alleviate the threats to lives in areas in Greater Cairo that city planning authorities have designated as unsafe. City authorities must also act to protect residents' rights to health and adequate housing," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

The Egyptian authorities have identified 35 "unsafe areas" in Egypt that require immediate intervention to safeguard people's lives, 16 of which are in Cairo, mostly in Manshiyet Nasser and Old Cairo's informal settlements. Plans to deal with these areas are developed without genuine consultation with the affected communities.

By June 2010, 14,800 families were living in imminent danger of death in Manshiyet Nasser alone, according to the estimates of Cairo authorities.

About 9,100 families from the neighbourhood have been relocated to alternative housing since the rockslide of 2008, although in many cases there were concerns that they had been forcibly evicted.