

EGYPT BARS EX-US ATTORNEY GENERAL FROM ISLAMIST TRIAL

By Reuters

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CAIRO: An Egyptian military court barred former US attorney general Ramsey Clark from observing a trial session on Sunday for 40 opposition Islamists on charges that include money-laundering and terrorism, an Islamist source said.

A source in the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's strongest opposition group, said security men had barred entry to Clark. They also barred a Jordanian lawyer sent to observe the trial for rights group Amnesty International.

Military trials in Egypt are usually held behind closed doors and attendance requires a permit from the court. Rights groups were also barred from an earlier trial session in June.

Clark, a controversial figure who led Saddam Hussein's defense team, told journalists outside the court before being turned away that he saw the military trial as "unthinkable".

"What would a military court have to do with this matter? Does anybody really believe that the civilian courts in Egypt are incapable of determining the rights of these men?" said Clark, who was the top US attorney in the late 1960s before becoming an anti-Vietnam war activist.

"I hope and pray that Egypt will see the light and that this government will concede the error of its ways," he added.

Clark also said the defendants deserved compensation for what he described as wrongful prosecution, saying they were held "without any charges that have any substance in any law in any land that believes in freedom". The Brotherhood says the men were not involved in any wrongdoing.

President Hosni Mubarak referred the 40 Brotherhood members, including third-in-command Khayrat El-Shater, to military justice earlier this year. The men were the first to be referred to a military tribunal since 2001.

Analysts say the trial is an escalation of a government crackdown on the non-violent Islamist group which won a fifth of the seats in parliament in 2005.