

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: MDE 19/002/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 053
2 March 2006

Libya: Amnesty International welcomes release of political prisoners

Amnesty International welcomes the release today of some 130 political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, and sees it as an important step towards the improvement of the human rights situation in Libya.

Those released include some 85 members of the Libyan Islamic Group (also known as the Muslim Brothers), many of whom had been held since June 1998. Sentences imposed on them in 2002 by the now abolished People's Court were overturned by the Supreme Court in September 2005. They included two death sentences and long prison terms. An ad hoc lower court subsequently retried the cases and last month upheld the original sentences.

Also released was Abdurrazig al-Mansouri, a writer and journalist who was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment in October 2005 for possessing an unlicensed pistol. The gun was apparently found the day after he was arrested in January 2005 at his home in Tobruk. The real reason for his imprisonment was believed to be critical articles about politics and human rights in Libya that he had published on the *Akhbar Libya* website shortly before his arrest.

The release of the Muslim Brothers had been expected for several months. Last year a committee established at the behest of Libyan leader Colonel Mu'ammr al-Gaddafi reportedly concluded that they had neither used nor advocated violence and should therefore be freed. It also recommended the release of dozens of members of other Islamist groups who, it said, had renounced violence. The committee included members of the Gaddafi International Foundation for Charitable Associations (since renamed the Gaddafi Development Foundation), headed by Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi.

While welcoming the releases, Amnesty International is concerned that many of them appear to be conditional. The Muslim Brothers, in particular, were reportedly made to sign pledges that they would not undertake any political activities. Amnesty International calls for this restriction to be lifted.

Amnesty International is also urging the Libyan authorities to take urgent action on the cases of other political detainees. In particular, the organization reiterates its appeal for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoner of conscience Fathi el-Jahmi, a political activist who has been detained without trial since March 2004, when he was arrested after criticizing Colonel Mu'ammr al-Gaddafi and calling for political reform in international media interviews. He is currently held at an undisclosed location understood to be a special facility of the Internal Security Agency. He has reportedly been denied visits by family members for several months.

In addition, Amnesty International calls on the Libyan authorities to clarify the legal status and reasons for detention of Mahmoud Mohamed Boushima and Kamel el-Kailani, who were arrested last year after they

returned to Libya following years of residence in the UK.