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Tunisia: Government repression “making a mockery” of World Summit on Information Society

The Tunisian government’s continuing clampdown on human rights defenders and its intolerance of domestic critics threatens to make a mockery of a major UN-sponsored international summit being held in Tunis this week, according to Amnesty International.

As delegates from many countries converge on Tunis to attend the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS), the government of President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali shows no signs of relaxing its grip and allowing Tunisians to speak openly about their hopes and aspirations for political and social change. On the contrary, the government is continuing to use both legal restrictions and unlawful strong arm tactics to stifle dissent, intimidate and punish its critics and opponents, including a courageous group of human rights defenders.

The decision to hold the WSIS in Tunisia, when it was made several years ago, was a highly controversial one because of the government’s poor human rights record. When it was confirmed, however, Amnesty International hoped like others that the Tunisian government would respond positively and do more to uphold its obligations to respect and protect human rights. But this has not happened. Instead, as Amnesty International details in a new report published on 14 November,¹ in recent months the Tunisian government has increasingly turned the screw on its critics, using arrests and imprisonment, censorship and “smear” campaigns by the state-owned media and even physical attacks in the street.

Last Friday, 11 November, with the WSIS only days away – it is due to be held 16-18 November – in an attack reminiscent of assaults carried out by Tunisian plain clothes security officers in the past, a French journalist was attacked in the street outside his Tunis hotel on the same day that he published a report critical of the Tunisian government’s human rights policies in the French daily *Libération*. Then, on 14 November, Tunisian lawyer and human rights defender Radhia Nasraoui and two foreign journalists accompanying her were physically threatened and abused by plain clothes security officers, adding to fears for the safety of Tunisian human rights defenders and those who express solidarity with them.

In light of these developments, Amnesty International has called on UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who will attend the opening of the summit, to exert all possible influence on the Tunisian government to ensure the safety of human rights defenders and international delegates attending the WSIS. Amnesty International is also calling directly on the Tunisian president to mark the opening of the summit by ordering the immediate, unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience and by taking other measures to ensure that all persons in Tunisia can freely “create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge” as required by the Declaration of Principles agreed at an earlier session of the WSIS.

¹See Amnesty International's report Tunisia: Human rights abuses in the run up to the WSIS, of 14 November 2005 (AI Index: MDE 30/019/2005)