

Urgent Action

In Focus

An insight into the stories behind UAs

Public

September 2007

AI Index: ACT 60/018/2007

Mohammed Abbou: "We need the world's solidarity"

In April 2005 lawyer and human rights defender Mohammed Abbou was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison after an unfair trial for publishing articles on the internet critical of the government. He was released on 24 July 2007 along with 21 other political prisoners to mark the 50th anniversary of the Republic of Tunisia. AI France's Maghreb HRD coordinator, Myriam Argoud, interviewed him by telephone a few weeks after his release.

What were the conditions like in prison?

There were three main features. First of all, they kept me a long way away from my family by holding me in the prison in the town of Kef, 170km from Tunis, which caused me and my family understandable suffering. Secondly, I spent two-and-a-half years in special conditions. Contrary to what normally happens in prison in Tunisia, I was put in a cell with only five or six other prisoners, who had been very carefully selected. They were there to spy on me, to report what I said, what I did. That also made it impossible for me to see or hear other prisoners and thus be able to testify in the future. Naturally I protested by going on hunger strike several times. I'll tell you another thing: During one of the hunger strikes, at the end of the ninth day, the prison director came to see me to tell me that, according to the law, I was obliged to go out for a walk and participate in the prisoner roll-call. After nine days on hunger strike...you can imagine how weak I was! I then asked to see the doctor who, despite my

deteriorating health, concluded that I could go out for a walk. He took refuge behind the law. The orders clearly came from on high.

Were you aware of the incredible level of action on your behalf?

Yes, I knew about it. It was of invaluable help to me and especially to my family. You know, in prison, your family becomes your main preoccupation. In April 2006, a prisoner who had been put in my cell told me, "You know, you should be careful. The authorities can do whatever they want with your family." Of course, that was all done to make me more anxious. It's pernicious.

What do you think helped bring about your release?

I wasn't certain of getting out before the end [of my sentence]. I'm convinced that the internal pressure inside Tunisia combined with the external pressure, such as the action taken by Amnesty International, were decisive factors. I

think also that the visit of [French] President Sarkozy who directly referred to my situation was not insignificant.

What are your current plans?

I'm going to resume my work as a lawyer and carry on campaigning for human rights. I still write. Shortly I'm supposed to be looking at the issue of press freedom in Tunisia with some journalists from Al Jazeera.

I would also like to say how touched I was to receive letters from seven- and eight-year-old children who wrote to me on behalf of Amnesty International Belgium. I think it's an excellent initiative to get children interested in the fate of a foreigner who has been imprisoned for exercising freedom of expression and conscience and to educate them in this way about human rights. I had those letters read to my children.

Human rights defenders in Tunisia are subjected to various kinds of threats and pressures which are clearly being stepped up at the moment. Amnesty International France is conducting a campaign on their behalf which will be taken up again next year. What do we need to do to make sure the campaign is successful?

I think that, above all, it needs daring and courage. That is true in Tunisia as well as abroad. For a society founded on democracy and human rights to emerge, we need to maintain relations with the outside world. Here, there's no respect for the opposition. We need the world's solidarity. That is absolutely crucial.