

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Syria: Amnesty International concerned at arrests of members of the Committee of the Families of Prisoners of Opinion and Conscience

Amnesty International expressed concern today over the latest arrests of human rights defenders in Syria and called on the government of President Bashar al-Assad to allow greater freedom and introduce a programme of human rights reform.

Amnesty International made this call in response to the arrests of two relatives of prisoners of conscience who participated on 25 July in the first press conference of a new organisation, the Committee of the Families of Prisoners of Opinion and Conscience. The conference was closed when security forces arrived. The next day, Yassin al-Hamwi was arrested at his shop, in the town of Darya, between Damascus and Qatana, and taken to an unknown location by security officers. His son, Haytham al-Hamwi, has been imprisoned since 2003 for involvement in peaceful activities such as establishing a free library, cleaning up the town and discouraging bribery and smoking.

On 27 July, Syrian security police also arrested Muhammad 'Ali al-'Abdullah at his home in Qatana. His father, 'Ali al-'Abdullah, also a prisoner of conscience, has been held since 15 May 2005. He was detained a week after he read a statement on behalf of the exiled leader of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) at a meeting of the Jamal al-Atassi Forum, a political discussion group which was itself then closed down by the authorities, and is now held in solitary confinement awaiting trial on charges of "promoting an illegal organisation."

Amnesty International criticised these latest arrests as a further backward step for human rights in Syria and called on President al-Assad to intervene and order the immediate and unconditional release of these and other prisoners of conscience. The human rights organisation described this latest crackdown as especially disappointing following the government's failure to use the recent congress of Syria's ruling Ba'ath party to push through much needed reforms.

Background

'Ali al-'Abdullah is said to be in solitary confinement in 'Adra Prison, near Damascus, and is charged with "promoting an illegal organisation," believed to be the MB, which is banned in Syria. His trial before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), whose procedures fall far short of international standards for fair trial procedures, is scheduled to begin on 30 October 2005. If convicted, he faces over three years in prison. [See MDE 24/045/2005, 1 July 2005]

Haythem al-Hamwi is one of four young men detained since May 2003, following their arrest after participating in a silent march in Darya, protesting the invasion of Iraq. The four men are imprisoned in Sednaya prison, near Damascus. They were sentenced, after grossly unfair trials before the Field Military

Court, to three to four years' imprisonment for "attempting to establish a religious organisation, involvement in unlicensed social activities and attending unlicensed religious and intellectual classes". They are being held in conditions which are said to be extremely unhealthy, dehumanising and degrading, and have been subjected to various forms of torture and ill-treatment. [See: *Torture, ill-treatment and unfair trials of the Darya activists*, MDE 24/056/2004, 19 August 2004].