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Tunisia: Amnesty International deploras prison sentence imposed on journalist Slim Boukhdir

Amnesty International is greatly concerned about the one year prison term imposed today on Slim Boukhdir, a freelance journalist, by a court in Sakiet Ezzit (Sfax) on charges of “insulting a public officer during the performance of his duties,” “breaching public morality” and “refusing to show his identity card.”

Slim Boukhdir was arrested on 26 November 2007 while on his way from Sfax to Tunis following a summons to collect his passport from Khaznadar, the Tunis suburb in which he resides. He appeared before a judge in Sakiet Ezzit the following day and was prosecuted under Articles 125 and 226*bis* of the Tunisian Penal Code.

His trial today was observed by members of an Amnesty International delegation currently visiting Tunisia as well as by members of Tunisian human rights organizations and a diplomatic representative from the US embassy in Tunis. During the hearing the defence lawyers highlighted a series of irregularities in the police and interrogation reports and asked the court to call and to cross-examine other witnesses. However, the judge declined to do so, in breach of the rights of defence, and sentenced Slim Boukhdir to one year's imprisonment on the first two charges and an additional fine of 5 dinars (approx. US\$ 4) for refusing to show his ID card. Slim Boukhdir was immediately returned to Sfax prison while his lawyers indicated that they would lodge an appeal against his conviction and sentence.

Amnesty International fears that this sentence is an attempt to silence Slim Boukhdir for his criticism of the authorities. In May 2007, he reported that he had received death threats following an interview he gave to *al-Hiwar* (Dialogue), a London-based TV channel, in which he criticized members of President Ben Ali's family. The week before he received these threats he was the victim of an assault by police officers. A freelance journalist, he was formerly employed by *Al-Chourouk*, a daily newspaper, but he was dismissed from his job after he used the internet to publish interviews he had conducted with a number of government critics and opponents who launched a hunger strike during the World Summit on Information Society in November 2005. Prior to his arrest in November 2007, Slim Boukhdir went on hunger strike himself for 15 days in protest at official delays in issuing him with a passport.

Slim Boukhdir's prosecution is the latest in a series of criminal charges brought against independent journalists and peaceful critics by the Tunisian authorities. These appear intended to deter journalists and editors, newspapers and magazines, from commenting critically on Tunisian government policies or the actions and decisions of senior ministers and officials. Such prosecutions form part of a wider pattern of repression of dissent which also involves direct censorship of Tunisian and foreign publications, including websites, that criticise the government, and harassment and intimidation of government critics and human rights defenders through heavy surveillance and other methods.

Amnesty International would consider Slim Boukhdir a prisoner of conscience and call for his immediate and unconditional release if he is imprisoned as a result of this prosecution. The organisation considers that he should not have been prosecuted for the legitimate exercise of his right to freedom of expression, and opposes the use of criminal defamation laws to "chill" expression and the free flow of information and ideas as guaranteed by international human rights standards such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.