

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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## **Tunisia: Legitimacy of UN Summit called into question by Tunisian government harassment**

As delegates at the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) signed on to the Tunis Commitment, reaffirming their support for human rights, Amnesty International said important lessons must be learned from the host government's failure to uphold these rights before and during the Summit, held in Tunis this week. The organization said the very legitimacy of the Summit and its outcome had been put in question by the interference of the Tunisian authorities, and no UN-sponsored summit should ever again be held under such oppressive conditions.

Human rights defenders and civil society activists were subjected to police surveillance and intimidation to prevent them from freely expressing their views and fully participating in the Summit. In several instances, Tunisian human rights activists and foreign journalists were physically assaulted by police outside the conference while going about their legitimate activities.

Access to the websites of human rights organizations who had published critical reports on Tunisia was blocked outside of the WSIS compound. Most independent Tunisian human rights groups were unable to participate in the WSIS, due to the authorities' persistent refusal to grant them legal status.

A parallel summit organized by civil society groups was effectively prevented, after a pre-booked venue was cancelled at the last minute, apparently at the behest of the Tunisian authorities. Plain-clothed police officers disrupted civil society activities by sealing off access to offices of human rights organizations and to venues for parallel events by non-governmental organizations.

Amnesty International is greatly concerned that, as the international spotlight now turns away from Tunisia, the country's human rights defenders may face further harassment and persecution from the authorities in retaliation for their having spoken out about human rights abuses in Tunisia during the course of the Summit.

In light of this fear and its concern that no UN-sponsored summit should take place under such conditions again, Amnesty International is calling on:

### **The Tunisian government to:**

investigate promptly, thoroughly and impartially the physical assaults on human rights defenders and foreign journalists which took place on the fringes of the Summit, and to bring to justice any officials

found to be responsible for ordering or carrying out such assaults;

take immediate steps to uphold the rights to freedom of expression and association and to protect human rights defenders in Tunisia, in accordance with its obligations under international law;

issue invitations without further delay to United Nations human rights experts who have requested to visit the country, including the Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders, the Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers and the Special Rapporteur on Torture;

**The UN to:**

launch an inquiry into the numerous restrictions placed on civil society activists before and during the Summit and to publish its results, with a view to guaranteeing full participation and protection of civil society activists during similar UN Summits in the future;

**Foreign governments to:**

support human rights defenders in Tunisia and make respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms a central element of their cooperation with Tunisia;

**The European Union to:**

make clear to the Tunisian government, at the highest level, its obligation to provide effective protection for human rights defenders and support their efforts to create and develop independent human rights organizations, in accordance with the EU's Guideline on Human Rights Defenders;

institute a transparent and effective process within the context of the EU's Association Agreement with Tunisia to facilitate continuous monitoring and regular review of human rights trends and developments in Tunisia, and to take effective action to assist the promotion and protection of human rights in Tunisia.