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Syria: End persecution of human rights defenders and human rights activists

Amnesty International is urging the Syrian authorities to cease the on-going harassment, arrests, unfair trials, imprisonment and prevention from travelling of human rights defenders and human rights activists.

On 6 December, the trial continued before the Hama Criminal Court of 'Abd al-Karim Dha'oun, a trustee of the Committee for the Defence of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights (CDDLHR). He was arrested on 12 September in connection with a report he had written as a health inspector, on conditions inside Hama Prison. CDDLHR President, human rights lawyer Aktham Nu'aysa remains on trial before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) on charges which could carry a sentence of up to 15 years' imprisonment.

On 23 November, two human rights defenders from the Arab Organisation of Human Rights - Syria (AOHR-S) were prevented from travelling to a human rights conference in Cairo, Egypt. AOHR-S President, human rights lawyer Mohammad Ra'dun and his colleague Dr Mahmoud al-'Aryan, were stopped at Damascus Airport. Human rights defenders are frequently prevented from travel outside the country and Amnesty International has previously called upon the Syrian authorities to lift travel restrictions imposed on human rights defenders and lawyers Haytham al-Maleh, Anwar al-Bunni and Razan Zaytouneh.

Also on 23 November, Amnesty International learnt that the family of prisoner of conscience 'Abdel Rahman al-Shaghouri was denied access to visit him at Sednaya Prison, having already received permission from Military Intelligence to do so. He has not been allowed any visits from his family, or from his lawyer, since his arrest in February 2003. On 20 June 2004 he was sentenced to two and a half years' imprisonment for e-mailing to friends and relatives articles, mainly from the *Akhbar al-Sharq* internet site, on human rights and politics in Syria.

Also on 23 November, Amnesty International received information confirming serious health concerns for two of the six prisoners of conscience held since the summer of 2001. Lawyer Habib 'Isa, 62, is suffering from chronic back pain and is in need of a hernia operation. Dr. 'Aref Dalilah, 64, has developed a serious heart condition which requires an operation, possibly to fit a pacemaker. It came to light in September that Habib 'Isa was beaten severely by guards in May 2002, the same month, it was already known, that Dr. 'Aref Dalilah had also been beaten. They were arrested in 2001 and sentenced to five and ten years' imprisonment respectively for their involvement in the short-lived pro-democracy and human rights movement known as the "Damascus Spring". All six men remain in prolonged, solitary detention.

A number of other prisoners of conscience are held for their human rights-related activities. Among these, students Muhammad 'Arab and Muhannad al-Dabas remain detained and on trial before the SSSC for their involvement in peaceful activities such as protesting a new law ending guaranteed employment for engineering graduates. On 27 June 2004 three Kurdish human rights activists were sentenced to two years' imprisonment for their participation in a peaceful demonstration in front of the UNICEF building in Damascus, calling for the rights of Syrian Kurds to be respected. Four young men from Darya, near Damascus, were sentenced on 1 April 2004 to between three and four years' imprisonment after their participation last year in peaceful activities such as establishing a free library, discouraging people from smoking, and participating in a silent demonstration in 2003 opposing the expected US-led invasion of Iraq.

Amnesty International calls for the dropping of all charges against 'Abd al-Karim Dha'oun, Aktham Nu'aysa, Muhammad 'Arab and Muhannad al-Dabas and the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience in Syria. The organisation urges the Syrian authorities to ensure that the legislation, under which prisoners of conscience have been imprisoned, be brought in line with Articles 18 - 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Syria has been a party since 1969, guaranteeing the right to freedom of conscience, expression, assembly and association and the right to exercise these freedoms without undue interference. In addition, Amnesty International urges the Syrian authorities to respect the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders adopted by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998 which states in Article 1 that "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels".