

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Syria: Punished for using the internet - Amnesty International calls for an end to the suppression of the right to freedom of expression

Amnesty International today called for the immediate release of prisoners of conscience held in Syrian prisons and detention centres for exercising the right to freedom of expression.

Over the past four decades hundreds of Syrians have suffered excessive restrictions on their right to freedom of expression. The government imposes censorship on correspondence, communications and information media. 'Abdel Rahman al-Shaghouri is just one Syrian who is suffering the affects of these measures. He is currently detained pending trial before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) on 15 March 2004. He is facing charges connected to the use of internet sites containing political information and sending articles to his friends. He was arrested on 23 February 2003 and reportedly beaten in custody before being transferred to Sednaya prison where he is said to be held without access to his family or lawyers. On the day of 'Abdel Rahman al-Shaghouri's arrest, secret police agents were reported to have entered his house and confiscated his computer, fax machine, CDs and other computer-related items.

Added to the list of those denied their right to freedom of expression are Muhannad Koutaish, his brother Haytham, and Yahia Alous who are held in Sednaya prison having been detained for almost one and a half years for using the internet. All were reportedly arrested for sending articles to an electronic newspaper in the United Arab Emirates. They have been tried by the SSSC on charges related to "publishing false reports" which carries a prison sentence of between three months and three years. The verdict is expected to be delivered on 15 March 2004.

Internet access is carefully monitored by the authorities in Syria and unfettered access is only possible by dialling internet service providers in neighbouring countries.

Amnesty International is concerned that prisoners of conscience, 'Abdel Rahman al-Shaghouri, Muhannad Koutaish, Haytham Koutaish and Yahia Alous, face not only prolonged detention, torture and/or other ill-treatment, but also the prospect of a grossly unfair trial. On the basis of evidence collected over the years by Amnesty International, the trials of political suspects before the SSSC invariably fall far short of international standards for fair trial. The SSSC places severe restrictions on the defendants' right to obtain effective legal representation and its verdicts are not subject to appeal before a higher tribunal. Amnesty International has also voiced concerns over the years that the SSSC appears to be neither independent nor impartial.

Over the years Amnesty International has documented evidence of opponents or suspected opponents not involved in violence who are routinely detained, harassed, tortured and, in some cases, summarily or extra-judicially executed. The organization has repeatedly expressed grave concern over the arrest and detention of hundreds of prisoners of conscience.

The State of Emergency Law established in 1963 has over the years facilitated gross human rights violations in Syria. This month saw the 41st anniversary of the imposition of State of Emergency Law - see Amnesty International's public statement: *Syria: 41 years of the State of Emergency - Amnesty International reiterates its concerns over a catalogue of human rights violations*, (MDE 24/016/2004, 8 March 2004). In a recent example of the suppression of the right to freedom of expression dozens of people, including human rights defenders, were arrested on 8 March when they marked the anniversary by protesting outside parliament against this law. They were all said to be released without charge on the same day.