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SYRIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL URGES GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS CASES OF MORE THAN 500 POLITICAL PRISONERS

The Syrian Government should act now to address the cases of more than 500 political prisoners -- including prisoners of conscience -- and victims of "disappearances" whose cases still remain unresolved, Amnesty International said after the return of its delegation from Syria yesterday.

"We welcome the government's willingness to continue dialogue and co-operation with the organization for the protection of human rights in Syria, but we would like this translated into action," Amnesty International said. "We have submitted the lists of more than 500 political prisoners to the authorities and we are calling on them to immediately release prisoners detained solely for their political beliefs."

The Amnesty International delegation also asked the authorities to review the cases of hundreds of political prisoners convicted and sentenced after unfair trials, to release everyone not charged with a recognizably criminal offence and to clarify the fate and whereabouts of the "disappeared". The authorities agreed to look into these cases but gave no time frame as to when this will be accomplished.

The delegation visited Syria between 11 and 24 March and met government officials, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Interior and Justice, as well as Information and Culture. They also met the Supreme State Security Court's judges, its prosecutor and a number of lawyers. In addition the delegation met the Secretaries General of the Arab Writers Union (AWU) and the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union (AIPU).

As on previous occasions Amnesty International welcomed the growing trend of improvements in human rights in Syria over the last few years. In particular the organization noted the release of approximately 2,000 political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, since 1995, and the significant decrease in arbitrary political arrests, detention and torture.

"The Syrian Government should now consolidate these positive human rights developments by implementing Syrian and international laws prohibiting arbitrary arrest and detention as well as torture and also guaranteeing defendants' right to a fair trial," Amnesty International said.

The organization also urged the authorities to ratify international human rights treaties to which Syria is not a party, such as the Convention against Torture and the optional protocols to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The government undertook to study possibilities of ratification of international human rights' treaties and initiate preventive action against torture by issuing directives to law enforcement officials reminding them that torture is a crime under Syrian law, and that the perpetrators will be punished.

Amnesty International meetings with the Syrian Ministers of Information and Culture, as well as the regional organizations (AWU and AIPU) also addressed promotional activities to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1998. All parties promised to initiate activities on the occasion, and support Amnesty international's activities in this field.

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