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SYRIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL WELCOMES RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS

Amnesty International today welcomed the release of at least hundreds of political prisoners -- possibly more than 1,000 -- including prisoners of conscience who have reportedly been released following an amnesty issued by the Syrian president earlier this month.

"By releasing these prisoners the Syrian government has taken a positive step towards improving its human rights situation," Amnesty International said today. "We hope that this step will lead to the release of all prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners not charged with a recognizably criminal offence."

The organization today welcomed these releases and is seeking details about the releases and the amnesty -- particularly the names of those released so far and those expected to be released in the near future.

The releases mark the anniversary of 25 years in power of President Hafez al-Assad. So far the releases include political prisoners held in connection with various political organizations and foreign nationals held in different prisons.

The majority of those released are said to be among those held in connection with membership of the Muslim Brotherhood. They also include doctors such as Ahmad al-Bairuti, a gynaecologist and member of the Syrian Doctors' Association, who had been in detention since November 1983.

One recently released detainee who had been held in Sadnaya Prison near Damascus, told Amnesty International that on 19 November he and a group of 75 others were taken to meet the prison director who informed them that they had been granted a presidential amnesty and were about to be released. Six days later he was able to return home.

Amnesty International is calling on the Syrian government to release all prisoners of conscience, such as Riad al-Turk, a 64-year-old lawyer who has spent 15 years in prison without ever being brought to trial. He is not known to have been released yet.

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