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Syria/Lebanon: The authorities must urgently investigate cases of death in custody

Following reports on the recent death in Syrian custody of Lebanese national Joseph Huways, and the recent denial of the Syrian authorities of the presence of any Lebanese political detainees in Syria, Amnesty International today called on the Syrian authorities to open an investigation into the case and allow prisoners access to lawyers, families and medical treatment.

In a statement carried by the media on 5 July, the Syrian Minister of Interior has denied the presence of any Lebanese political detainees in Syria.

"We have the names of a number of Lebanese political detainees who have been held in Syrian prisons for years mostly incommunicado, following their transfer from Lebanon to Syria by the Syrian military forces operating in Lebanon," Amnesty International said.

The death of Joseph Huways in the third week of June fits into a pattern of ill-treatment of Lebanese detained in Syria and highlights the endemic failure of the Syrian authorities to uphold international laws and standards governing the detention and treatment in custody of political detainees," the organization added.

Huways, a 43-year-old epileptic, is at least the third Lebanese to have died in custody since 1996. He had been reportedly denied access to medical treatment.

"The Syrian authorities must establish an independent and impartial investigation into the death of Joseph Huways and all recent deaths in custody of political detainees in accordance with international standards," Amnesty International stressed.

Amnesty International has been calling on the Syrian authorities to disclose the fate and whereabouts of scores of Lebanese who have "disappeared" following their arrest in Lebanon or transfer to Syria by Syrian military or intelligence forces.

Despite repeated calls, the Syrian authorities have failed over the years to provide clarifications of scores of cases of Lebanese nationals who have been detained or who have disappeared in Syria.

"The Syrian authorities must disclose as a matter of urgency the names of all Lebanese nationals

held in Syrian jails and allow them immediate and unrestricted access to their families and lawyers," Amnesty International said.

"There is no legal basis for the arrest and transfer of Lebanese nationals to Syria who are later held either without trial or after unfair trials."

Amnesty International is concerned about the safety of the detainees, especially in view of recurrent news of torture and ill-treatment, and their detention in inhuman conditions. There have been reports on detainees who were particularly at risk - - including Shaykh 'Alam el-Din Hassan, aged 66 and Milad Na'oum al-Khouri, aged 64 - - who have been held incommunicado for over 14 years. The organization is also concerned by the failure of the Lebanese government to take the matter of Lebanese detained or disappeared in Syria up with the Syrian authorities.

"The Lebanese authorities must intervene on behalf of all Lebanese prisoners held in Syria, ascertain whom exactly is held and under what conditions, and keep relatives of the detainees informed," Amnesty International said.

"Lebanon's failure to prevent the transfer of those arrested within its jurisdiction, to protect them from torture and to ensure that they are able to challenge the lawfulness of their detention amount at best to serious negligence and at worst to condoning these practices."

Background

'Adel Khalaf Ajjuri, a Lebanese political prisoners died in Sednaya Prison in Syria on 22 September 1999 after nine years in detention, reportedly after being denied access to specialist medical care. The Syrian authorities indicated that the cause of death was heart failure but no autopsy was performed on his body by either the Syrian or Lebanese authorities. Lebanese citizen Joseph Zughayb died in Syrian detention in 1996 in unknown circumstances. Radwan Ibrahim died in Lebanese detention shortly after being transferred from a prison in Syria in December 2000. He had been suffering from a kidney infection and high blood pressure and was reportedly not receiving any medication.

In 2002, Amnesty International received a letter from the Syrian authorities confirming the detention of George Ayub Shalawit and Tony Jirgis Tamer, both reportedly sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges of "spying" for Israel. A third detainee, Najib Yusuf Jarmani whose case was raised by Amnesty International with the Syrian authorities, was reportedly sentenced to death on the same charge. It is not clear whether the death penalty has been carried out. There are fears that he may have been extrajudicially executed.

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