

PUBLIC

AI Index: MDE 24/026/2004

UA 134/04

Possible prisoner of conscience / Fear of torture or ill-treatment

1 April 2004

SYRIA

Muhammad Ghanem (m), born 1955, school teacher/ writer

Possible prisoner of conscience, Muhammad Ghanem was arrested on 23 March. He has been held incommunicado since then, at an unknown location, and Amnesty International is concerned that he is at risk of torture or ill-treatment.

Military Security officers took Muhammad Ghanem from his home in the town of al-Raqqa, in northern Syria, on the afternoon of 23 March. It is believed that he was arrested because he had published several articles that month in which he criticized the recent killing of Syrian Kurds by the security forces, and the continuation of the State of Emergency in the country.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A wave of arrests, riots and killings swept Syria in March 2004. At a football match in the town of Qamishli, in the north-east of the country, security forces reportedly fired into crowds, killing at least 20 people, following clashes between Syrian Kurdish and Syrian Arab fans on 12 March. Three children were said to have been killed in the stampede as the crowds ran to escape the shooting.

Following this incident, clashes between Syrian Kurds and the security forces broke out elsewhere in Qamishli, Aleppo, al-Hassaka and other towns in the north. A number of government buildings as well as Kurdish homes and shops were attacked by different groups. Over 2,000 people, mostly Kurds, are believed to have been arrested. Many of them are held incommunicado at unknown locations. A number of people, including children, have reportedly been tortured and about 40 have reportedly been killed either deliberately or as the result of an excessive use of force. Amnesty International has the names of more than 100 people who have been injured as a result of the clashes. (See UA 110/04, MDE 24/019/2004, 16 March 2004 and follow-ups).

In addition, at least 24 Kurdish students have been expelled from their universities and dormitories, and, in what appears to reflect a pattern of increasing persecution of Kurdish people, Syrian Kurds are reportedly being arrested or attacked solely on the basis of their ethnicity or for speaking Kurdish.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English, Arabic, French or your own language:

- asking why Muhammad Ghanem was arrested on 23 March 2004;
- expressing concern that Muhammad Ghanem appears to be a possible prisoner of conscience, arrested solely for the peaceful expression of his political views;
- calling for him to be released immediately and unconditionally unless he is to be promptly charged with a recognizably criminal offence and tried in accordance with international standards for fair trial;
- calling on the authorities to guarantee that Muhammad Ghanem will not be tortured or otherwise ill-treated during his detention;
- urging that Muhammad Ghanem be given immediate access to a lawyer and visits from his relatives as well as medical treatment should he require it.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency Bashar al-Assad
President
Presidential Palace
Abu Rummaneh
al-Rashid Street
Damascus
Syrian Arab Republic

Telegram: President al-Assad, Damascus, Syria

Fax: + 963 11 332 3410

Salutation: Your Excellency

His Excellency Major General 'Ali Hammud
Minister of the Interior
Ministry of Interior
Merjeh Circle
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic

Telegram: Interior Minister, Damascus, Syria

Fax: + 963 11 222 3428

Telex: 411016 AFIRS SY

Salutation: Your Excellency

COPIES TO: Diplomatic representatives of Syria accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 13 May 2004.