

EXTERNAL

AI Index: MDE 30/03/96

UA 15/96

Fear of ill-treatment / Health concern /
Prisoner of conscience

25 January 1996

TUNISIA Mohamed Hedi SASSI

Mohamed Hedi Sassi, imprisoned since April 1994, has been on hunger-strike since last week. Amnesty International is not only concerned for his health, but also fears that, as on previous occasions, he may face ill-treatment as punishment for his protest. As a prisoner of conscience, Mohamed Hedi Sassi should be immediately and unconditionally released.

During the past two years Mohamed Hedi Sassi has undertaken repeated hunger-strikes to protest his imprisonment, the conditions of his detention, and the torture and ill-treatment he has been subjected to on numerous occasions.

On each occasion he was punished by the prison authorities by being kept chained by the foot in isolation cells and being forbidden visits by his family and lawyers. On several occasions he was also reportedly beaten and ill-treated and was refused water. Such punishment clearly violates both Tunisian law and international human rights treaties ratified by Tunisia.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Mohamed Hedi Sassi was arrested on 18 April 1994 and accused of distributing leaflets about the imprisonment of a leading figure of the *Parti communiste des ouvriers tunisiens*, PCOT (Tunisian Workers' Communist Party). After his arrest he was reportedly tortured by being suspended in contorted positions, having liquid poured into his nose, which came out of his ears, and being severely beaten all over his body. His defence lawyers, and lawyers from the Tunisian Human Rights League who saw him over a week after his arrest confirmed that he bore marks and bruises on his face and his body. No judicial investigation has been carried out to date into complaints raised before the court by Mohamed Hedi Sassi and his lawyers.

He was convicted of supporting an unauthorized association, distributing leaflets insulting public order and writing slogans on the walls (quoting the verse "the chains must be broken", from a poem by the well-known Tunisian poet Belkacem Chebbi). He was sentenced on 11 May 1994 to four years and one month's imprisonment, and the sentence was reduced to three years on appeal on 27 February 1995. In addition he had also been previously sentenced *in absentia* in November 1993 to 18 months' imprisonment on similar charges. This sentence was reduced to four months in November 1994. He is currently serving a total sentence of three years and four months' imprisonment in the 9 Avril Prison in Tunis. For the past two months his lawyers have not been allowed to visit him, even though his case is still pending review by cassation by the Supreme Court. [Mohamed Hedi Sassi was also the subject of UA 190/94 (MDE 30/15/94, 17 May 1994)].

The human rights situation in Tunisia has continued to deteriorate over the past five years; Amnesty International's concerns in the country include the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience; torture and ill-treatment of detainees, during often illegally prolonged incommunicado detention; deaths in custody; unfair trials; and the imposition of administrative control measures on prisoners of conscience upon their release. The organization has raised its concerns repeatedly with the Tunisian authorities, but to date no full, independent and public investigation has been carried out into the numerous cases of human rights violations which have been brought to their attention.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in French/Arabic/English or your own language:

- seeking assurances that Mohamed Hedi Sassi will not be subjected to any form of ill-treatment in punishment for his hunger-strike, stressing that such punishment would violate Article 13 of the UN Convention Against Torture, which Tunisia has ratified, and breaches Rule 33 of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners;
- urging that he be allowed access to his lawyer and family;
- reiterating that Mohamed Hedi Sassi is a prisoner of conscience and calling for his immediate and unconditional release;
- expressing concern that no independent inquiry or judicial investigation has been carried out into his allegations of complaints of earlier torture and ill-treatment.

APPEALS TO:

1) Minister of the Interior

M. Mohamed Jegham
Ministre de l'Intérieur
Ministère de l'Intérieur
Av. Habib Bourguiba
Tunis
Tunisia

Faxes: +216 1 340888

Telexes: 13662 sdap tn

Telegrams: Ministre de l'Intérieur, Tunis, Tunisia

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Your Excellency

2) Minister of Justice

M. Sadok Chaâbane
Ministre de la Justice
Ministère de la Justice
Boulevard Bab Benat
Tunis
Tunisia

Faxes: +216 1 568 106

Telexes: 13000 maet tn (via Ministère de l'Intérieur)

Telegrams: Ministre de la Justice Chaâbane, Tunis, Tunisie

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Your Excellency

3) Minister of Foreign Affairs

M. Habib Ben Yahia
Ministre des Affaires étrangères
Ministère des Affaires étrangères
Place du Gouvernement
La Kasbah, Tunis, Tunisia

Telexes: 14470 mafta tn, 14471 mafta tn, 14472 mafta tn

Telegrams: Ministre des Affaires étrangères Ben Yahia, Tunis, Tunisie

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Your Excellency

COPIES TO:

Tunisian Human Rights League

Me Taoufik Bouderbala, Président

Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme, LTDH

21 Rue Imam el Bakri
1002 TUNIS Belvedere
Tunisia
Faxes: +216 1 801 599

and to diplomatic representatives of TUNISIA accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 16 March 1996.