

EXTERNAL

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"Disappearance" / Fear of torture /
Prisoner of conscience

14 January 1997

TUNISIA Amar Amroussia, aged 37, primary school teacher

Amar Amroussia, from Gafsa in south-western Tunisia, has been held in secret detention since his arrest on 13 January 1997. Amnesty International fears for his safety, given the continuing practice in Tunisia of submitting suspected political opposition activists and their relatives to torture and ill-treatment during secret detention. Concern for Amar Amroussia is further heightened by the fact that he is in poor health, suffering from a broken eardrum and nose for which he was shortly to undergo an operation. Amnesty International believes that he is a prisoner of conscience.

Amar Amroussia, who is married with three young daughters, was arrested near his home on the morning of 13 January as he was returning home with one of his daughters from the kindergarten. The arresting officers handcuffed him in front of his child and immediately took him away. Amar Amroussia's lawyer inquired of the Public Prosecutor in Gabes the reasons for his arrest and detention, but the Public Prosecutor denied all knowledge of the case. Inquiries have also been made of the Ministry of the Interior, but with no success.

Amar Amroussia had previously been sentenced *in absentia* on 16 December 1992 to three years and nine months' imprisonment in a trial involving 11 alleged supporters of the unauthorized *Partie communiste des ouvriers tunisiens*, (PCOT), Tunisian Workers' Communist Party. The charges against all of the defendants had included membership of an unauthorized political party (the PCOT), attending unauthorized meetings, distribution of leaflets and the unauthorized collection of funds.

Amar Amroussia petitioned the court to retry his case (according to Tunisian law those who have been tried and sentenced *in absentia* have the right to retrial). The first hearing of the case was due to be held on 8 January 1997 before the *Tribunal de première instance* (Court of the First Instance) in Gabes, but was postponed until 22 January. Police went to his home on 9 January and took him to the police station in order to check that he had official documentation from the court stating that his case is being retried. He was released after half an hour.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Arrests, detentions, torture and ill-treatment, imprisonment of prisoners of conscience, unfair trials and systematic harassment have been increasingly used in Tunisia to punish, intimidate and silence opposition political activists, government critics, human rights activists and others in Tunisia over the past few years.

Amnesty International has continued to document and condemn such human rights violations in Tunisia, and to call on the Tunisian authorities to take concrete steps to put an end to such practices. In the past few weeks five well-known prisoners of conscience who were serving sentences of up to 11 years were conditionally released. However, they are prevented from exercising their civil rights and remain under close surveillance; at least one of them has

been rearrested and held for one night in the Ministry of the Interior. Amnesty International has welcomed the release of these prisoners of conscience as a positive step, and continues to call for the release of the remaining prisoners of conscience and for measures to be taken to end the ongoing human rights violations in Tunisia.

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

- expressing concern at the "disappearance" of Amar Amroussia after his arrest on 13 January 1997;
- seeking information about his current place of detention and legal status;
- urging that he be immediately and unconditionally released as a prisoner of conscience;
- expressing concern that he may be at risk of torture or ill-treatment whilst he is held in secret detention, and asking that he be allowed access to his family, lawyers and to independent medical assistance if necessary.

APPEALS TO:

1) 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

2) Minister of the Interior

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

Fax: +216 1 340888

Telegrams: Ministre de l'Intérieur, Tunis, Tunisie

Telex: 13662 sdap tn

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Your Excellency

COPIES TO:

Tunisian Human Rights League

Me Taoufik Bouderbala, Président

Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme, LTDH

7 Rue Pierre Curie

TUNIS, Tunisia

Faxes: + 216 1 336 338

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 2 March 1997.