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## **TUNISIA: A CAMPAIGN OF ATTACKS AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

Amnesty International has written to President Ben Ali today to express its concern at recent arrests and intimidation of human rights defenders in Tunisia.

The increasing harassment to which Tunisian human rights defenders have been subjected on a daily basis is a source of grave concern for Amnesty International. The organization calls on the Tunisian authorities to put an immediate end to such practices and to take the necessary measures to ensure that human rights defenders are allowed to carry out their activities, as required by international human rights standards to which Tunisia is a state party.

Amongst the issues of concern is the arrest on 8 April 2000 of Fathi Chamkhi, President of the *Rassemblement pour une Alternative Internationale de Développement*, RAID (Rally for an International Alternative of Development), Mohamed Chourabi, member of RAID, and Iheb el Hani, owner of a photocopy shop.

Fathi Chamkhi, Mohamed Chourabi and Iheb el Hani have been accused of possessing documents and reports of RAID and of the *Conseil national des libertés en Tunisie*, CNLT (National Council for Liberties in Tunisia), and have been charged with "spreading false information liable to disturb public order, defamation of the authorities, inciting fellow-citizens to violate the laws of the country, and belonging to an unauthorized association". Amnesty international considers them as prisoners of conscience and calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

Also of concern to the organization is the case of Taoufik Ben Brik, journalist and CNLT member, who has been on hunger strike since 3 April to protest against being deprived of his passport and against the harassment of his family. He has been charged with "spreading false information liable to disturb public order and defamation of the authorities" on the basis of his articles which were published by foreign media.

In another case, on 10 April the security services forcibly evacuated and closed down the Aloès publishing house, headed by Sihem Ben Sedrine, a journalist, former leader of the *Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme*, LTDH (Tunisian League for Human Rights), and currently member of RAID and of the CNLT. The Aloès' offices, where Taoufik Ben Brik was conducting his hunger strike, were down because the authorities considered that a public meeting which took place there the previous day in the presence of several foreign journalist was "a threat to public order".

This last incident is only the latest of a long pattern of harassment against Sihem Ben Sedrine. Two weeks ago Sihem Ben Sedrine, whose passport has been confiscated for years, and Fatma Ksila, a CNLT member whose passport is also confiscated, had undertaken a hunger strike in the offices of the *Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates*, ATDF (Tunisian Association of Democratic Women), to protest against this arbitrary measure. The husband of Sihem Ben Sedrine, CNLT Secretary-General Omar Mestiri, and the husband of Fatma Ksila, LTDH Vice-president Khemais Ksila, who was released from prison last September after two years' imprisonment, have both also had their passports confiscated and their home telephone lines have been disconnected for months.

Sadri Khiari, another CNLT member who is currently in France, has also been summoned to appear before the court in Tunis following a press conference he gave in Paris to launch the first annual report of the CNLT about the situation of human rights and public liberties in Tunisia.

In addition, on 1 April 2000 the Tunisian authorities banned a public meeting organized by the Tunisian Section of Amnesty International about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia. Police shoved and pushed people seeking to enter the Amnesty International office in Tunis.

These recent developments stand in stark contrast to the Tunisian authorities' repeatedly proclaimed commitment to human rights protection and promotion.

On 6 April 2000, the Tunisian delegation to the 56<sup>th</sup> UN Commission for Human Rights stated that Tunisia had chosen "a model of society based on the state of law, the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms of the individuals, and the development of an open, tolerant and caring society".

Amnesty International calls on the Tunisian authorities to implement their promises now.  
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UK, on 44 171 413 5831 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>**