

AI INDEX: MDE 30/19/196
2 JULY 1996

TUNISIA: GOVERNMENT MUST DO MORE THAN PAY LIP SERVICE TO ITS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITMENTS

An Amnesty International delegation led by the organization's Secretary General, Pierre Sané, has returned from a visit to Tunisia.

During his visit Mr Sané attended the annual general meeting of the Tunisian Section of Amnesty International, participated in a meeting of non-governmental organizations from the region which took place at the Arab Institute for Human Rights, and discussed the human rights situation in Tunisia with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Mr Sané conveyed the organization's grave concerns about the deterioration of the human rights situation in Tunisia to President Ben Ali through three of his counsellors. He urged the Tunisian Government to take urgent measures to end arbitrary detention of prisoners of conscience, torture and ill-treatment, unfair trials and the harassment of human rights activists, former prisoners and families of prisoners

"These practices can only damage Tunisia's international reputation. With continuing violations and the ever expanding circle of repression, the human rights discourse of the Tunisian authorities sounds more and more hollow," said Pierre Sané.

Mr Sané also strongly protested at the constant police surveillance imposed on Amnesty International's delegation throughout their stay in Tunisia.

"We have some difficulty in reconciling the message of welcome from the government with this kind of surveillance, clearly aimed at intimidating the delegation and those in contact with Amnesty International," said Pierre Sané.

The concerns raised include the constant harassment of the Tunisian Section of Amnesty International, most notably by intercepting its mail, cutting its telephone and harassing its members. The Tunisian Section does not work on human rights violations in Tunisia.

"This harassment, which prevents the Tunisian Section from carrying out its work of fighting human rights violations throughout the world, has to stop," said Pierre Sané.

The Secretary General also expressed his profound regret at the authorities' refusal to allow him to meet with prisoners of conscience such as Najib Hosni, human rights lawyer, and Khemais Chammari, human rights activist and member of parliament for the opposition party MDS (*Mouvement of Social Democrats*).

In the past few years Amnesty International has continued to raise its concerns with the Tunisian Government, in the face of the increasingly deteriorating human rights situation in the country. However, to date no concrete measures have been taken to end these violations and the Tunisian authorities continue to deny the existence of such violations.

Amnesty International remains determined to go beyond the denials and intimidation, and to continue to inform the international community of the real human rights situation in Tunisia.
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