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TUNISIA: REPRESSION THRIVES ON IMPUNITY

Human rights violations continue in Tunisia as the circle of repression widens, Amnesty International said in a report issued today.

Arbitrary detention, imprisonment, torture, ill-treatment and various forms of harassment are used to punish, intimidate and silence political opponents, government critics, victims of human rights violations, their relatives, lawyers, human rights activists, journalists and others.

Human rights bodies and commissions of inquiries set up by the Tunisian government have consistently failed to investigate the human rights violations brought to their attention. Their ineffectiveness to investigate and prevent such violations has been striking, and their inability and lack of will to carry out their stated mission is increasingly obvious.

"Members of the security forces who have committed such violations have been afforded impunity, and their victims have been denied the right to redress. Such attitude can only encourage further violations," Amnesty International said.

The number of prisoners of conscience imprisoned on account of peaceful political activities or for criticizing the government has continued to grow over the past eight years.

Mohamed Kilani, a leading figure of the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (PCOT) and editor of the now banned *al-Badil* newspaper, was sentenced in February 1995 to two years' imprisonment for supporting the PCOT. In April he was also sentenced to an additional five years' imprisonment on charge of possessing a leaflet produced in 1991 by the illegal Islamist party, *al-Nahda*, an organization whose ideology and political program Mohammed Kilani is well-known to oppose. His defence lawyers withdrew from the trial in protest at the court's refusal to provide them copies of the leaflet.

Accused of supporting the unauthorized Islamist party, *al-Nahda*, Imed Ebdelli, a philosophy student at Tunis University, was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in May 1995. After his arrest he was held in illegally prolonged incommunicado detention in the Ministry of the Interior. During this time he was reportedly beaten and ill-treated. He had been imprisoned on similar charges on previous occasions, and had been released in January 1994 after serving a two-year sentence. Since his release he had been forced to report daily to the police station and his passport was confiscated.

The former president of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), Moncef Marzouki, was detained for four months after he announced his intention to stand as a candidate in the

presidential elections in February 1994. After his release, his passport was confiscated and was prevented from leaving Tunisia on several occasions.

His nephew, 23-year-old student Riadh Bedoui, was arrested last June and sentenced to two and half years' imprisonment on charges of belonging to an unauthorized association, and his brother was recently released after spending 15 months in prison for the same reason.

Wives and relatives of exiled political activists, particularly Islamists, are often detained and questioned about their relatives' whereabouts and activities. Many have reported being subjected to ill-treatment, sexual abuse, rape threats, and threats of prosecution.

Aicha Dhaouadi, a school teacher mother of a three-year-old girl, was arrested in May 1995 and is currently serving a nine-month prison sentence on charges of having supported of *al-Nahda*. After her first arrest on 1994, she was reportedly told to stop wearing the headscarf or face imprisonment for illegal political activities and her passport was confiscated.

In addition to existing laws which have been used to imprison thousands of prisoners of conscience in the past few years, new laws further curtailing freedom of expression and associations were introduced in November 1993. They define in broad and vague terms "terrorist activities", and allow for the imprisonment of Tunisians on account of peaceful political activities, even if these are not considered illegal in these countries.

Torture and ill-treatment have been widespread, especially since 1990. Suspension in contorted positions, beatings on the sole of the feet, the genitals, the head and other sensitive parts of the body, sexual abuse and threats of rape are the most frequently reported methods. In most cases these are inflicted on detainees during incommunicado detention, often illegally prolonged, but in the past two years there are increasing reports of ill-treatment in prisons.

Amnesty International calls on the Tunisian authorities to release immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience, retry or release political prisoners convicted in unfair trials, put an end to the imposition of administrative control on released prisoners of conscience, and investigate thoroughly cases of torture and ill-treatment in custody and prison.

The organization also calls on the Tunisian judiciary to exercise their profession with independence and impartiality, to refuse confessions obtained under torture and laws which violate international human rights standards.

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