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Lebanon: Amnesty International demands independent investigation into death in custody and end to incommunicado detention

Amnesty International is calling upon the Lebanese authorities to set up immediately an independent investigation into the cause of death of 31-year-old Isma'il Mohammad al-Khatib who died in incommunicado detention at an unknown location on 27 September.

The organization is also concerned for the safety of around 16 Islamist activists who have been held incommunicado at secret locations in Lebanon following their arrest by Lebanese and Syrian security forces at various locations in Lebanon. It is feared they may be at risk of torture and ill-treatment to compel them to incriminate themselves for alleged "terrorist" acts.

Lebanon's Minister of the Interior Elias al-Murr said Isma'il al-Khatib was among 10 people arrested on 22 September, apparently for alleged links to al-Qa'eda and an alleged plan to attack the Italian and Ukrainian embassies, the Palace of Justice and other government security buildings in Beirut. A further nine people were arrested on similar "security" grounds from 18 September, according to al-Murr and the Lebanese Prosecutor-General 'Adnan 'Addoum, and are still held in incommunicado detention at unknown locations. Five of those detained are believed to be Ahmad Salim al-Miqati, Nabil al-Khatib, Nabil 'Abd al-Ghani Jallul, Jamal Gasseem 'Abd al-Wahid and Shafiq Samir al-Banna.

A statement from the Lebanese security forces about the death in custody of Isma'il al-Khatib said that "al-Khatib was taken ill in the morning and taken immediately to hospital but he died of a massive heart attack" said to have been the result of "respiratory complications". However, according to media reports, family and friends of Isma'il al-Khatib claim that he had been in good health, and his sister Latifa, who had been held with another sister, An'am, at the same detention centre until being released on 28 September, said that she had heard Isma'il screaming in pain from his cell. Security officers reportedly told her that her brother was suffering from kidney problems and had been given medicine. Isma'il al-Khatib was buried on 29 September. His family said that his body carried signs of torture on his face, eyes and feet, including cigarette burns.

Amnesty International believes that an independent investigation is needed to ensure that justice is done. The authorities must ensure that such an investigation is prompt, thorough and impartial, and carried out by investigators independent of the prosecuting authorities and the agencies involved in the arrest and interrogation of the victim. It must have access to impartial medical or other experts, as well as to relevant documentation and files. The relevant authorities must guarantee full cooperation with the investigation. In the meantime, the Lebanese authorities must stop their practice of detaining alleged security suspects in incommunicado detention, particularly at unknown locations, where torture and ill-treatment may be more easily carried out.

The authorities claim that some of those arrested are connected to the Dhinniyyah group of Sunni Islamist detainees who have been brought to trial before the Justice Council over the past several years. In May 2003 Amnesty International issued a report, *Lebanon: Torture and unfair trial of the Dhinniyyah detainees* which documents torture, ill-treatment and unfair trial of "security" detainees. Dhinniyyah detainees were reportedly routinely held for prolonged periods in fixed positions in underground cells at the Ministry of Defence Detention Centre, at al-Yarze. They were reportedly tortured including being subjected to electric shocks and the *ballanco* (hanging by the wrists which are tied behind the back) to coerce them to make "confessions". In January 2003, two of the Dhinniyyah detainees were admitted to Dhahr al-Bashiq Hospital, the same hospital in which Isma'il al-Khatib died, reportedly having sustained serious injuries.