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Syria: Amnesty International repeats its call for the release of five prisoners of conscience held for their peaceful use of the Internet

On the eve of the final hearing of 'Abdel Rahman al-Shaghouri before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) on 20 June, Amnesty International is repeating its call for his immediate and unconditional release -- along with that of four other prisoners of conscience, Muhannad Qutaysh, Haytham Qutaysh, Yahia al-Aws and Mas'oud Hamid, held solely for peaceful exercise of their right to free expression over the Internet. 'Abdel Rahman al-Shaghouri's lawyers have not been granted access to all court documents, despite their repeated demands. Amnesty International considers trials before the SSSC to be grossly unfair.

'Abdel Rahman al-Shaghouri, who is 32 years old, was arrested on 23 February 2003 and reportedly beaten in custody before being transferred to Sednaya prison where he continues to be held without access to his family or lawyers. He is charged with "disseminating in Syria false and exaggerated news that sap the morale of the nation" in accordance with Article 286 of the Penal Code. The charges are based on his sending via the Internet articles obtained mostly from *Akhbar al-Sharq* internet site -- www.thisissyria.net. The material carried by *Akhbar al-Sharq* is regarded by the Syrian authorities to be "detrimental to the reputation and security of the nation" and "full of ideas and views opposed to the system of government in Syria".

Three other Syrians imprisoned in Sednaya and being unfairly tried on similar grounds are Muhannad Qutaysh [previously spelled as *Koutaish* in MDE 24/017/2004, 12 March 2004], his brother Haytham, and Yahia al-Aws [previously spelled as *Alous* in MDE 24/017/2004, 12 March 2004]. All were arrested, over one and a half years ago, reportedly for sending articles to an electronic newspaper in the United Arab Emirates. On 6 June, their trial before the SSSC was again postponed, to 25 July. Muhannad Qutaysh and Yahia al-Aws are both charged with "receiving secret information on behalf of a foreign state which threatens the security of Syria", and "publishing false news outside of Syria"; Haytham and Muhannad Qutaysh are both charged with "encouraging the transfer of secret information"; and Haythem Qutaysh is also charged with "writing which threatens the security of Syria and her relations with foreign states". Muhannad Qutaysh and Yahia al-Aws had reportedly been writing articles, using pseudonyms, on corruption, politics, economics and human rights issues in Syria.

Student Mas'oud Hamid is a fifth Syrian imprisoned for reported "unlawful" use of the Internet. Mas'oud Hamid was arrested on 24 July 2003 while sitting an exam at Damascus University. It is believed that he is being held incommunicado in solitary confinement at 'Adra Prison, near Damascus. It is thought that his detention relates to his alleged posting of photos of a peaceful Kurdish demonstration in Damascus -- during which seven Kurds were arrested -- onto the Internet site, www.amude.com. The seven Kurds remain imprisoned.