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Syria: Arbitrary detention and torture of Islamist activists must stop

Amnesty International today called on the Syrian authorities to put an immediate end to arbitrary arrests and intimidation of Islamist activists including nationals from other countries. In recent weeks and months the authorities have arbitrarily arrested scores of Islamist activists without due legal process and contrary to the Syrian Constitution and international human rights treaties to which Syria is a state party.

At least 50 Islamist activists have been arbitrarily arrested over the last two months according to information reaching Amnesty International. The magnitude of arrests is not known given they are carried out secretly by the security forces during night raids and the authorities do not immediately acknowledge that such arrests have taken place.

Amnesty International is concerned that those arrested and detained in such a manner have invariably been held incommunicado with the attendant risk of torture and ill-treatment. Not only are they denied access to lawyers and their families, the detainees also risk being referred to Field Military Courts. In previous years Amnesty International monitored a pattern where trials before these courts fell far short of international fair trial standards.

The latest wave of arrests took place on 2 July when military intelligence officers carried out night raids on homes in Qatnah on the outskirts of Damascus and arrested an unspecified number of people. Most of those arrested and subsequently detained incommunicado are reportedly secondary school students. According to a statement issued by the Human Rights Association in Syria, the detainees include Anwar Badr al-Din, Ayham Ahmad 'Umran, Sari Muhyi al-Din Badr al-Din, Fadi Muhammad 'Abd al-Ghani, Usama Ahmad Atiyyah, Ahmad Dib al-Zayn, Rami Ahmad 'Arafa, Adkar Bundugji, Yahya Bundugj, Gasem Bundugj, Arshid al-Shaykh, Tareq Nadim Shehadah, Ibrahim Sabbura, Ahmad al-Shaykh, and 'Umar Nader.

On 7 June, Lebanese national Muhammad Ramiz Sultan was arrested by members of the Syrian security forces at the Syrian-Lebanese borders as he and his wife travelled to Syria for a holiday. Amnesty International is gravely concerned for his safety since he has been held incommunicado since arrest, reportedly at the Palestine Branch Detention Centre in Damascus, where torture and ill-treatment is routine. Muhammad Ramiz Sultan had recently been detained in Lebanon in connection with vaguely defined "terrorist" offences and had reportedly suffered from injuries sustained as a result of torture at the Ministry of Defence Detention Centre in al-Yarze, near Beirut, where he had been held incommunicado.

Amnesty International repeats its call on the Syrian authorities to stop the ongoing arbitrary arrest of Islamist activists and to ensure that those arrested are humanely treated while in the custody of the

Syrian authorities and not subjected to torture or ill-treatment. Those detained must be released immediately unless they are to be charged with a recognizably criminal offence and brought to trial before an independent court of law in accordance with international standards for fair trials. Should any recognizably criminal offence be brought against them, Amnesty International urges the authorities to release them while they await trial. These Islamist activists and all other political prisoners held since the late 1970s and early 1980s should be released as the authorities have not heeded calls for their fair trial and have ignored repeated calls by Amnesty International, other human rights organizations and UN bodies for their cases to be reviewed. Furthermore the authorities must carry out an independent and thorough investigation into all allegations of torture and ill-treatment inflicted on Islamist activists and other political detainees belonging to other political parties in accordance with Syrian Law and the Constitution.

Background

Amnesty International has the names of scores of Islamist political prisoners who have been held for over two decades, some of them for over ten years beyond the expiry of their sentences. They suffer serious illnesses which have been exacerbated by cruel, inhuman and degrading detention conditions, coupled with years of torture and ill-treatment. Among them is Dhafer Qate'i, who was arrested when he was under 18 in connection with the Muslim Brotherhood Organization and charged after a grossly unfair trial with killing a government official. He has been in prison for over 23 years, despite having reportedly been sentenced to 12 years. Suffering from a mental condition, Dhafer Qate'i was among some 20 minors suspected of affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood Organization who had been sentenced to 12 years in prison on charges of killings. Some of them have been released.