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Algeria: Habib Souaidia's trial highlights concerns over failure to conduct investigations

Amnesty International today called on the Algerian authorities to stop obstructing investigations of grave human rights abuses in the run-up to a libel trial brought against former Algerian army officer Habib Souaidia by the former Algerian defence minister, retired General Khaled Nezzar, that is due to begin in Paris on Monday.

Habib Souaidia is the author of a book published in 2001 called *La Sale Guerre* (The Dirty War), which details reports of torture, extrajudicial executions and other grave human rights abuses committed by the security forces, state-armed militias and armed groups during the current conflict. He is being sued by Khaled Nezzar for defamation following comments he made about the retired general on a French television channel in May 2001.

"Serious allegations have been made by Habib Souaidia," said Amnesty International. "With thousands of families still waiting up to 10 years to learn the truth about what happened to murdered or 'disappeared' relatives, it is high time the Algerian authorities meet their international obligations by taking concrete steps to establish the truth about these crimes and many others like them."

The organization once again reiterates its call to the Algerian authorities to set up an independent and impartial commission of inquiry without further delay to investigate the thousands of killings, "disappearances", reports of torture and other human rights abuses committed since 1992 by the security forces, state-armed militias and armed groups.

Meanwhile, a worrying development recently emerged in a torture case brought against Khaled Nezzar in France in April 2001. One of the three plaintiffs, Abdelouahab Boukezouha, withdrew his case in April 2002 following the arrest of his son in Algeria on charges of having links with an armed group. The case was filed by two torture victims and the family of a third, all of whom live in France, who alleged that Nezzar was responsible for torture committed while he was Algeria's Defence Minister from 1990 to 1993.

Rachid Mesli, an Algerian human rights lawyer who lives in exile and who is expected to appear as a defence witness in the trial starting today, has, since April 2002, been the subject of an international arrest warrant issued by the Algerian authorities. He is accused of being involved in a "terrorist group conducting its activities abroad". The charge appears to be based on Rachid Mesli's intention to send a mobile telephone to an Algeria-based contact who relayed information to him on the human rights

situation in the country.

The contact himself and at least three others known to have had links with Rachid Mesli have themselves been targeted for particularly harsh treatment. Arrested in separate incidents in March and April 2002 on charges of having links with a "terrorist" group, they were all allegedly detained in the Military Security base of Ben Aknoun and there repeatedly tortured over several days.

" It is an irony that on the same day the International Criminal Court enters into effect, such a trial will take place while the Algerian authorities continue to put obstacles in the way of those who raise concerns about the human rights situation in the country," Amnesty International added.

Recent months have seen a clampdown on local human rights activists, while UN human rights mechanisms and international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International continue to be denied access to the country.

Background

Following the publication of his book, an arrest warrant was issued against Habib Souaidia. On 29 April 2002 he was sentenced by a criminal court in Algiers to 20 years' imprisonment, convicted of participating in efforts to undermine the morale of the army and of state security offences. Habib Souaidia lives in exile in France and the trial was conducted in his absence. According to the prosecution, Habib Souaidia is quoted on a website as saying that he was "ready to return to the country to take up arms" against senior army officers.

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