

PUBLIC

AI Index: MDE 30/028/2002

16 December 2002

UA 364/02 Fear for safety/brutality

TUNISIA Saida Akremi (f)
Nourredine Bhiri (m), her husband
Two of their children, M. and S., aged 13 and 15
Lasad Jouhri (m)
Mokhtar Yahiaoui (m)
Samir Ben Amor (m)
Samir Dilou (m)
Other lawyers and human rights defenders

A number of human rights defenders, lawyers, and their relatives, have been assaulted or detained by the security forces in Tunisia in the last few days. Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of members of the newly-created organization, the *Association Internationale de Soutien aux Prisonniers Politiques* (AISPP), International Association for the Support of Political Prisoners, and for all lawyers and human rights defenders in the country.

On 13 December, human rights lawyers Saida Akremi and Nourredine Bhiri and two of their four children were attacked by a group of men as they arrived at the lawyers' office in the capital, Tunis at around 8am. Their car was encircled by approximately ten men, believed to belong to the State Security Department (*amn ad-dawla*). All four members of the family were forced out of the car and violently assaulted. One of the children was beaten in the face, causing his mouth to bleed. Saida Akremi was forced into an unmarked car and driven away to an unknown location. She was released without charge from the Ministry of Interior around six hours later.

Another human rights defender, Lasad Jouhri, was on his way to the lawyers' office at the time of the attack. He tried to intervene, but was also assaulted by the men. Witnesses called the emergency ambulance service and he was transported to a hospital in Tunis. He was later allowed to return home but is badly bruised. Several lawyers who came to show their solidarity with the victims after the attack were also assaulted.

Two other lawyers were also arrested on 13 December. Samir Ben Amor, a human rights lawyer, was on his way to Saida Akremi and Nourredine Bhiri's office when he was encircled by individuals, brutalized, forced into a car and taken to the State Security Department at the Ministry of Interior where he was questioned about his activities for the AISPP. Samir Dilou, also a human rights lawyer working with the AISPP, was stopped in a separate incident and taken to a police station. Both men were released without charge after several hours.

On 14 December, Mokhtar Yahiaoui, a former judge, was arrested by members of the security forces outside his home in Tunis and taken in an unmarked car to the Ministry of Interior where he was interrogated about his activities within the AISPP. During the interrogation he and his family were reportedly threatened by the security forces. On 11 December, Mokhtar Yahiaoui had been violently attacked on a street near Saida Akremi and Nourredine Bhiri's office. This assault took place a day after International Human Rights Day where Mokhtar Yahiaoui had signed an appeal on behalf of the AISPP for the lifting of the prolonged solitary confinement of political prisoners in Tunisian prisons, and for the guarantee of their basic rights. Mokhtar Yahiaoui was dismissed from the judiciary in December 2001 after writing an open letter to President Ben Ali, in which he called for the constitutional principle of the independence of the judiciary to be respected.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Saida Akremi, Mokhtar Yahiaoui, Samir Ben Amor and Samir Dilou are founding members of the newly created International Association for the Support of Political Prisoners. Mokhtar Yahiaoui is president and Nourredine Bhiri a founding member of the *Centre de Tunis pour l'Indépendance de la Justice* (CIJ), Tunisian Centre for the Independence of the Judiciary. Both the CIJ and the AISPP are unauthorized, and the founding members of both organizations have faced repeated obstructions as they try to become established. Lasad Jouhri, a former prisoner of conscience and a human rights defender working on behalf of political prisoners in Tunisia, was previously assaulted in the street by five plainclothes policemen in August 2002 (see UA 271/02, MDE 30/016/2002, 29 August 2002).

In Tunisia, there has been a pattern of attacks on human rights defenders by plainclothes or uniformed security agents, established over many years. People detained by the security forces are at risk of ill-treatment and torture. When they attempt to file a complaint, clerks or police agents often refuse to register it. When a complaint is registered, it is hardly ever followed by an investigation by the competent authorities.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Arabic or French or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of lawyers and human rights defenders in Tunisia following a number of incidents in which they have been targeted and attacked by the authorities;
- urging the authorities to provide guarantees for the safety of Saida Akremi, Nourredine Bhiri, Lasad Jouhri, Samir Ben Amor, Samir Dilou, and Mokhtar Yahiaoui, and for other human rights defenders and lawyers who have been targeted;
- calling for a full and impartial investigation into the attacks to be undertaken, that the results are made public and those responsible brought to justice;
- calling on the authorities to put an immediate end to the targeting of lawyers and human rights defenders, and to take the necessary measures to guarantee their safety and the safety of their relatives.

APPEALS TO:

Minister of Justice and Human Rights

M. Bechir Tekkari
31 Av. Bab Benat
1006 Tunis - La Kasbah
Tunisia

Telegram: Minister of Justice, Tunis, Tunisia

Fax: + 216 71 568 106

E-mail: mju@ministeres.tn

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Your Excellency

Minister of the Interior

M. Hédi M=henni
Ministère de l'Intérieur
Avenue Habib Bourguiba
1000 Tunis
Tunisia

Telegram: Minister of the Interior, Tunis, Tunisia

Fax: + 216 71 340 880 / 888

E-mail: mint@ministeres.tn

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Your Excellency

COPIES TO: Diplomatic representatives of Tunisia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 27 January 2003