

PUBLIC

AI Index: MDE 30/017/2001

Further information on UA 06/00 (MDE 30/01/00, 11 January 2000) and follow-up (MDE 30/03/00, 10 February 2000) - Fear for safety/Prisoner of conscience 26 June 2001

TUNISIA Sihem Ben Sedrine (f), journalist, human rights defender

Journalist Sihem Ben Sedrine was arrested on 26 June, when she returned from a two-week tour of Europe, where she spoke publicly about how the human rights situation in Tunisia has deteriorated, and how civil liberties and freedom of expression have been increasingly curtailed. In the past she has been beaten in police custody, and Amnesty International fears for her safety.

Last week, several Tunisian newspapers sympathetic to the authorities published articles attacking Sihem Ben Sedrine. Human rights defenders in Tunisia and abroad were concerned that she would be in danger when she returned to Tunisia. Several people were waiting for her when she arrived at Tunis-Carthage airport, and saw the police arresting her.

She was brought before the *juge d'instruction* (examining magistrate) and charged with spreading false information aimed at undermining the public order and with defaming the judiciary. The magistrate then ordered her to be taken to Manouba Prison, in Tunis. She will appear for questioning on 5 July.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Sihem Ben Sedrine is the spokesperson of the unauthorized *Conseil National pour les Libertés en Tunisie* (CNLT), National Council for Freedoms in Tunisia. She has been harassed and intimidated by the security forces for many years because of her human rights work and political activities.

In April 2000, she was arrested and badly beaten by police when she attempted to visit another journalist, Taoufik Ben Brik, who was on hunger strike to protest at police harassment. On the night of 14 December 2000 her car was broken into and a large knife was left on the back seat with a threatening note. Although the car was parked near her home, which is under 24-hour police surveillance, the police claimed they had seen nothing.

Sihem Ben Sedrine publishes a web-based newspaper, *Kalima* (at <http://www.Kalimatunisie.com>) which contains much material on human rights, civil liberties and censorship. It cannot be printed and sold in Tunisia because the authorities refuse to authorize it, but people can read it on the web from inside Tunisia, usually through proxy sites.

The Tunisian authorities have recently stepped up their campaign of harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders.

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

- expressing concern that Sihem Ben Sedrine was arrested on 26 June, and urging that she be immediately and unconditionally released as a prisoner of conscience;
- seeking assurances that she will be treated humanely in custody, in accordance with international standards for the treatment of detainees, and that she will be given immediate access to her family and lawyers;
- calling on the Tunisian authorities to ensure that all human rights defenders in the country will be allowed to work and campaign freely;

- reminding the government of Tunisia of its commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in particular Article 19: "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression".

APPEALS TO:

President

Président M. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali
Président de la République
Palais Présidentiel
Tunis
Tunisia

Fax:+ 216 1 744 721

Salutation: Excellence

Interior Minister

M. Abdallah Kaabi
Ministre de l'Intérieur
Ministère de l'Intérieur
Avenue Habib Bourguiba
1001 Tunis
Tunisia

Fax:+ 216 1 340 888

E-mail: mint@ministeres.tn

Salutation: Excellence

Justice Minister

M. Bechir Takkari
Ministre de la Justice
Ministère de la Justice
31 Boulevard Bab Benat
1006 Tunis
Tunisia

Fax:+ 216 1 568 106

E-mail: mju@ministeres.tn

Salutation: Excellence

COPIES TO:

M. Slaheddine Maâoui
Bureau du Premier Ministre
Ministre chargé des Droits de l' Homme
Place du Gouvernement
La Kasbah
1006 Tunis
Tunisia

Fax:+ 216 1 256 766

and 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 8 August 2001.