

UA 97/00

Fear for safety

28 April 2000

TUNISIA Human rights defenders and their relatives

Police have beaten and arrested a number of lawyers, journalists and NGO activists, in a sudden increase in the continuing repression of human rights defenders and their relatives in Tunisia.

Journalist Taoufik Ben Brik has been on hunger strike since 3 April in protest at the confiscation of his passport and harassment of his family. Friends and relatives who tried to visit him in the past few days have been beaten by police and prevented from seeing him.

A group of prominent lawyers who went to see Taoufik Ben Brik at a private clinic in Tunis on 25 April were beaten by police, as were Taoufik's wife Azza, medical doctor Khelil Zaouia and other friends and relatives who wanted to see him.

Among the lawyers trying to visit Taoufik Ben Brik were Bar Council member Radhia Nasraoui (f) (see UA 48/98, MDE 30/04/98, and follow-ups; UA 194/99, MDE 30/31/99, and follow-ups); Chawki Tabib, Secretary General of the *Association tunisienne des jeunes avocats* (ATJA), Tunisian Association of Young Lawyers; ATJA Secretary General Mohamed Salah Chatti; former Bar Council Secretary General Jamaledine Bida; Fadhel Ghedamsi, who sits on the board of the *Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme* (LTDH), Tunisian Human Rights League; Mourad Belbich and Ayachi Hammami.

The next day Taoufik Ben Brik's brother Jallal Zoughlami and others tried to visit him at home. They were beaten by police and then arrested, and beaten with sticks at Al Manar police station in Tunis. Jallal Zoughlami is reported to have sustained a serious nose injury and is detained on charges of "unauthorized gathering in a public place, violence against law-enforcement officers, and inciting people to break the law". Of those who were with him, 70-year-old Ali Ben Salem, who is disabled, was taken to the outskirts of Tunis and left in great pain on the street. He remains in hospital with spinal and other injuries. Editor Sihem Ben Sedrine (f) (see UA 06/00, MDE 30/01/00 and follow-ups) was released later that day, as was student Tayeb Noaman. Sihem Ben Sedrine, a member of the *Conseil National des libertés en Tunisie* (CNLT), National Council for Liberties in Tunisia, and former LTDH board member, had injuries to the eye and shoulder.

Among others beaten and ill-treated by police that day were the Secretary General and a staff member of the French press freedom NGO *Reporters sans frontières* (RSF, Reporters Without Borders, and several Algerian, French and Swiss journalists who had travelled to Tunis to express their solidarity. The police also damaged and confiscated the foreign journalists' equipment and material.

Most of the people named above have had their telephones disconnected by the authorities to prevent them from communicating with the outside world.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Human rights defenders, lawyers and NGO activists have recently faced increased harassment and intimidation. On 8 April 2000 police arrested the President of the *Rassemblement pour une Alternative Internationale de Développement* (RAID), Rally for an International Alternative for Development, Fathi Chamkhi,

together with RAID member Mohamed Chourabi and photocopy shop owner Iheb el Hani. They were accused of possessing RAID and CNLT documents and reports, and have been charged with "spreading false information liable to disturb public order, defamation of the authorities, inciting fellow-citizens to violate the laws of the country, and belonging to an unauthorized association". These echo the charges laid against Taoufik Ben Brik of "spreading false information liable to disturb public order and defamation of the authorities", on the basis of his articles criticizing the authorities which were published abroad. On 10 April the police forcibly evacuated and closed down Sihem Ben Sedrine's publishing house, where Taoufik Ben Brik was conducting his hunger strike, on the grounds that a public meeting held there the previous day in the presence of several foreign journalists was considered to have been "a threat to public order".

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in French, Arabic, English or your own language:

- expressing grave concern at the increased attacks on human rights defenders, lawyers and NGO activists and their relatives, and calling on the Tunisian authorities to put an immediate end to such practices and to allow all human rights defenders to carry out their activities freely, in compliance with international human rights treaties ratified by Tunisia;
- urging the authorities to conduct prompt, full and impartial investigations into the beating and ill-treatment of the people named above, and to bring those responsible to justice;
- calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Jallal Zoughlami, Fathi Chamkhi, Mohamed Chourabi and Iheb el Hani, who are detained as prisoners of conscience, and for charges to be dropped against Taoufik Ben Brik.

APPEALS TO:

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

Telegrams: Ministre Interieur, Tunis, Tunisia

Faxes: + 216 1 340 888

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

Faxes:+ 216 1 568 106

COPIES TO:

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

Faxes:+ 216 1 570 842

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 9 June 2000.