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Fear for safety

28 November 2000

TUNISIA

Human rights defenders

Victims of human rights abuses by the authorities

The Tunisian authorities have effectively closed down the country's main human rights organisation. They now have control of its offices and have access to all its files on human rights violations by the state. The organisation's leaders now face arrest if they continue their human rights activities, and those who have reported state human rights abuses risk further persecution.

The *Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme* (LTDH), Tunisian Human Rights League, is the oldest human rights organisation in the Arab world. Its closure is a major setback to the progress of human rights in the country. After years of keeping a low profile, as a result of government pressures, the LTDH had reasserted itself as a force for human rights by electing known and outspoken human rights activists to its governing body at the end of last month.

On 27 November a Tunis court ordered all LTDH activities to cease on the pretext that four of its members, known to be close to the authorities, had complained that elections to the organisation's governing body at the end of last month had been unfair. A bailiff and police went immediately to the LTDH office in Tunis, ordering the organisation's President and Executive Board to leave at once. They may be arrested and prosecuted for anything they do from now on behalf of the LTDH.

The authorities now control the LTDH offices and have access to all the information held there. This poses a grave risk to those who have testified in confidence to the LTDH about human rights abuses in the country. Those who complain, and their families, routinely face retaliation by the authorities and security services.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The LTDH was dissolved in 1992 when it refused to comply with a new law regulating the activities of NGOs, which was enacted by the authorities to curtail and control NGO activities. Since it resumed operations in 1994, the LTDH has been under constant pressure from the authorities, whose policy of coercion, cooption and infiltration has brought NGO activities to a virtual standstill. Hence, since 1994 its activities have been very limited and not threatening to the government.

However, at its Congress in late October, the LTDH elected a new 25-member board made up of outspoken human rights defenders, including a new President, human rights lawyer Mokhtar Trifi. With these new board members, who in recent years had taken a courageous stance on human rights issues in the face of official intimidation and pressure, the LTDH suddenly posed a threat to the authorities.

Four LTDH members known to be close to the authorities filed a complaint that the election at the Congress had been unfair. Three of the four had stood unsuccessfully for election. None had raised any objections before the result was announced, and they have so far done nothing to substantiate their claims. At the same time the authorities launched a series of virulent attacks on the newly-elected LTDH board, in public declarations and in articles in the rigidly state-controlled press.

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

- expressing concern at this latest attack on Tunisian human rights defenders;
- urging that the suspension of the LTDH activities be immediately revoked, and that the organisation be allowed to resume using their offices;
- seeking assurances that the complaint filed by the participants to the LTDH's 5th Congress be subjected to a fair procedure for both parties, the plaintiffs

and the LTDH board against whom the complaint has been lodged, and that the latter be given adequate time to prepare their defence.

APPEALS TO:

Minister of the Interior

M. Abdallah KALLEL

Ministre de l'Intérieur

Ministère de l'Intérieur

Avenue Habib Bourguiba

1001 Tunis, Tunisia

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Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Your Excellency

Presidential Councillor for Human Rights

M. Dali JAZI

Conseiller Spécial auprès du Président de la République,

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Fax: + 216 1 571314

Salutation: Monsieur le Conseiller / Your Excellency

COPIES TO:

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Mokhtar TRIFI

Président

Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme

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Salutation: Chers Amis/ Monsieur le Président, Membres de la LTDH

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 January 2000.