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## **Syria: Release of 121 Lebanese prisoners - a positive step**

The Syrian authorities' release of 121 Lebanese detainees last week is a positive step but should be accompanied by substantive legislative changes to protect human rights, Amnesty International said today.

The human rights organization is also calling on the Syrian Government to release all prisoners of conscience who have been imprisoned for their political beliefs after grossly unfair trials.

The Lebanese detainees, most of whom were held without charge or trial since the 1970s, were released by the Syrian Government and handed over to the Lebanese authorities.

Eighteen of the released prisoners are being held by the Lebanese authorities for their alleged involvement in criminal offences, including murder, collaboration with Israel and drug dealing. Among them is Haytel al-Hayek who is being remanded in custody in connection with alleged involvement in the killing of former Prime Minister Rached Karami.

Amnesty International is calling on the Lebanese authorities to bring those held to fair trials according to international standards and allow them unrestricted access to their lawyers and families. They should not be ill-treated and must be held in custody under the supervision of the judiciary.

While welcoming the releases, which were reportedly carried out after the intervention of the Syrian and Lebanese Presidents, the organization is still seriously concerned about the continued detention in various Syrian prisons of hundreds of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners. Most of them are currently serving prison sentences of up to 22 years handed down by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) solely for belonging to an opposition political party, after grossly unfair trials.

Dozens of Lebanese political prisoners are serving sentences for their alleged collaboration with Israel. Scores of detainees of other nationalities, including Palestinians, still remain in detention, without charge or trial.

Amnesty International is particularly disturbed that more than 30 prisoners of conscience and political detainees are being held beyond the expiry of their sentences. They include prisoners of conscience Khalil Brayez, 65, who has been held for 27 years, 12 years beyond the expiry of his sentence, and Fateh Jamus who is being held beyond the expiry of the 12 years' imprisonment handed down by the SSSC for his activities for the Party for Communist Action.

The organisation is gravely concerned that Riad al-Turk, a leading member of the Communist Party Political Bureau, who is in his late sixties, is still in detention without charge or

trial. He has been in detention for more than 17 years now, was reportedly severely tortured and is currently in poor health.

Amnesty International is calling on the Syrian authorities to release all prisoners of conscience, to ensure that political prisoners are brought to trial according to international standards for fair trial if they are charged with recognizably criminal offence and to allow them immediate and unrestricted access to their families and lawyers.

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