

Syria: prisoner of conscience denied life-saving treatment

Amnesty International is today calling on the Syrian authorities to allow a jailed human rights defender to receive the medical care he needs. The organization has been campaigning for his release for years.

Nizar Nayyuf, a prisoner of conscience in detention since 1992, is suffering from Hodgkin's disease, a form of cancer. The specialist treatment urgently needed to stop the disease from spreading is not available in the military hospital he was referred to and requires his transfer to a civil hospital.

The authorities have reportedly made such transfer conditional upon his disavowal of his political beliefs and requested him to distance himself from the Committee for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights (CDF) of which he is a leading member.

"Putting prisoners' lives at risk by denying them access to essential medical treatment amounts to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and must not be allowed," Amnesty International said.

In so doing, the Syrian authorities are violating the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Syria is a State Party, and the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, which stipulate in Rule 22 that "sick prisoners who require specialist treatment shall be transferred to specialised institutions or to civil hospitals."

Hundreds of political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, have been in detention in Syria for up to 32 years, many of them after unfair trials by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC). A large number of them, however, were released in March and June 1998, some of them following an amnesty granted by President Hafez al-Assad.

Amnesty International is aware of a number of prisoners of conscience and political detainees being held beyond the expiry of their sentences and of others who need specialist medical treatment. Many of these medical conditions are the result of appalling prison conditions and of torture and ill-treatment as a routine practice.

Nizar Nayyuf is a leading member of the unauthorised CDF. He is serving a 10 years' sentence on charges of founding an unlawful organization, disseminating false information and undermining the government of President Hafez al-Assad. During his detention he has reportedly been subjected to torture and ill-treatment, which has resulted in a serious deterioration of his health.

The other CDF members still serving prison sentences and adopted by Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience are Muhammad 'Ali Habib, Thabit Murad, 'Afif Muzhir

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and Bassam al-Shaykh. They were sentenced by the SSSC after a grossly unfair trial in 1992. Their persecution was apparently related to a CDF leaflet critical of Syrian presidential elections.

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