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## **Tunisia: human rights in peril despite government propaganda**

Defending human rights in Tunisia has become increasingly difficult over the past few years despite serious attempts by the authorities to improve their human rights image, Amnesty International says in a new report today.

“The range of techniques used by the authorities to silence and intimidate human rights activists is continuously being broadened, with new and more sophisticated methods being added to an already far-reaching apparatus,” the organisation states.

The authorities have spared no effort in trying to improve their human rights image, creating various official human rights institutions and even a website, called misleadingly “<http://www.amnesty-tunisia.org>” while access to Amnesty International’s and other websites containing information about the human rights situation in Tunisia is blocked .

Alongside imprisonment, short-term detention, harassment and torture, the authorities have introduced telephone tapping, fax and mail interception and even sleaze campaigns to harass and intimidate human rights defenders and curtail their activities.

The sleaze campaigns have taken several forms, including publicizing photo and video montages showing human rights defenders in compromising situations, as well as publications containing allegations of immoral conduct by human rights defenders.

The Tunisian government often accuses those who publicly oppose the widespread violations of human rights of engaging in “subversive activities”, of “undermining the state’s institutions” or of being “in favour of the Islamists and against democracy.”

“The targeting of human rights defenders has been taking place against a background of a growing intolerance by the authorities over the past eight years for dissent, criticism or political opposition of any kind,” the report underlines, adding that “the government’s human rights rhetoric is aimed at improving its image whilst the human rights situation worsens.”

In the report, Amnesty International underlines the cases of four prominent human rights defenders who have been unjustly imprisoned for long periods of time in the past four years and many others who have been detained, harassed and intimidated. In none of these cases was the Tunisian judiciary able or willing to redress the injustice,” the human rights organization points out.

Among them is **Khemais Ksila**, vice-president of the *Ligue tunisienne des droits de l’homme* (LTDH), Tunisian Human Rights League, who has been imprisoned since September 1997. He was arrested after publicly announcing that he was going on hunger strike to protest at

the increasing harassment against himself and his family. He was charged, among other things, with undermining public order and was sentenced to three years' imprisonment.

Former LTDH President **Dr Moncef Marzouki** and human rights lawyer **Najib Hosni** were released from prison in 1994 and 1996, respectively, after sustained international protests at their treatment but continue to be subjected to daily harassment and restrictions. They are prevented from working and from travelling, their telephone and faxes are disconnected and their mail intercepted.

Prominent human rights lawyer and member of the Tunisian Bar Council **Radhia Nasraoui** is currently being prosecuted for "terrorism"; since March she has been banned from leaving the country or even the capital. She and her children have been followed and harassed.

Harassment and intimidation have recently also increased for lawyer and women's rights activist **Najet Yacoubi** and human rights lawyer **Anouar Kousri**; their homes and offices are under constant police surveillance and they are followed everywhere they go.

Human rights organizations have found it increasingly difficult to carry out their activities. The LTDH, the *Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates* (ATDF), Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, and Amnesty International's Tunisian Section have had their offices under police surveillance, their members and leaders interrogated, followed and harassed by police, their meetings and other activities banned or disrupted, their mail confiscated and their telephone tapped.

"Any mention of these organizations' activities and material is banished from the Tunisian media, which is strictly controlled by the government," Amnesty International comments in the report.

"The extent and scale of the harassment and intimidation which human rights defenders have suffered in Tunisia for a number of years indicate that these are not only tolerated but are encouraged at the highest level by the Tunisian authorities," Amnesty International says.

In the report, the human rights organization makes several recommendations to the Tunisian authorities: Amnesty International seeks the immediate and unconditional release of the LTDH Vice-President **Khemais Ksila** and the lifting of all restrictions imposed on all human rights defenders.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Human Rights Universal Declaration, Amnesty International also urges the Tunisian government to take concrete and effective measures to implement UN recommendations which call on governments to act to protect human rights defenders and their work for human rights.

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