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Algeria: Torture allegations taint trial over political activist's killing

Joint Statement by the International Commission of Jurists and Amnesty International

The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) and Amnesty International today expressed concern over the trial of Mohamed Belbouri before the criminal court of Oran in Algeria. The next hearing of the trial will be held on 9 December 2013.

Belbouri, aged 29, stands as the sole accused in the murder of Professor Ahmed Kerroumi, an Algerian political activist. Kerroumi was killed in April 2011, shortly after meeting with the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, Frank La Rue, in Algeria.

The ICJ and Amnesty International call on the Algerian authorities to ensure the right of Kerroumi's family members to know the truth about his killing and to criminally hold the perpetrator(s) to account in line with international fair trial standards.

The two organizations are concerned that the Belbouri trial has failed to meet these standards, including the right of the accused to be presumed innocent and to defence. The two organizations are further concerned by allegations that acts of torture and other ill-treatment were inflicted on Belbouri during his interrogation in police facilities between 12 and 17 May 2011, apparently aiming to make him "confess" to the killing of Kerroumi.

Belbouri says he was beaten on the head, face, stomach and feet, electrocuted, made to sit on his knees for hours with a chair on his head, and threatened that his relatives would be ill-treated if he did not "confess".

"Algerian authorities must respect and ensure the right of Belbouri to a fair hearing before an independent and impartial tribunal and in full compliance with international fair trial standards," said Wilder Tayler, ICJ Secretary General.

"The authorities must also ensure that all reports of torture and other ill-treatment of Belbouri are thoroughly and impartially investigated, and that any statement alleged to have been obtained as a result of torture or other ill-treatment is not admitted as evidence by the court," Tayler added.

Lawyers representing the accused and the family of Professor Kerroumi have both said that the trial was marred by irregularities. These include the court's refusal to allow the defence to call and cross-examine witnesses, including the forensic expert who performed the autopsy on Ahmed Kerroumi's body, and to challenge and test evidence put forward by the prosecution.

"Justice would not be served by sentencing – possibly to death – a man who has claimed his innocence all along when there are so many doubts about the seriousness of the investigation," said Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.