

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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Further information on UA 13/92 (MDE 24/01/92, 9 January 1992) and follow-ups MDE 24/02/92 of 17 January 1992 and MDE 24/03/92 of 29 January 1992 - Prisoners of Conscience (Please note change of concern)

SYRIA: Aktham Nu'aysa
Muhammad 'Ali Habib
'Afif Muzhir
Samir Nu'aysa

and new names:	Nizar Nayyuf	Jadi' Nawfal
	Bassam al-Shaykh	Ya'qub Musa
	Thabit Murad	Yasser Askif
	Hassan 'Ali	Nazim Husayn
	Hussam Salama	Nabil Na'us
and	Amjad Bahbuha	

Fourteen human rights activists were sentenced on 17 March 1992 to prison terms ranging between three and ten years after a trial which fell below international standards for fair trial. Three others were acquitted. Their sentences are not subject to appeal but have to be ratified by President Hafez al-Assad, who may suspend the verdict, order a retrial or reduce the penalty. Amnesty International had sought authorization to send representatives to observe the trial but this was not granted by the Syrian government.

The 14 were convicted on three separate charges: dissemination of false information, receiving money from abroad, and the withholding of information. The accusation of dissemination of false information is related to a leaflet issued and distributed by the Committee for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF) on 10 December 1991. The leaflet contained criticism of human rights violations in Syria and the re-election of President Hafez al-Assad at the beginning of December 1991. The CDF, a voluntary non-political and unofficial organization set up in 1989, has been campaigning for the abolition of the state of emergency legislation in force in Syria for nearly 30 years, the release of all political prisoners and for the respect of individual freedoms. The leaflet and activities of the CDF were considered to be a crime through "the publication of false information intended to create anxiety and to shake the confidence of the masses in the aims of the revolution" of 8 March 1963. The charge of receiving money from abroad is said to relate to about 25,000 Syrian Lira (about £700) sent to one of the main defendants, Aktham Nu'aysa, by a brother of his who lives in Europe. The prosecution considered this money transfer to be destined for financing the activities of the CDF and as such a crime punishable by death. Finally, the charge relating to the withholding of information was brought against some defendants on the grounds that they were aware of the distribution of the CDF leaflet and possibly of the financial transaction and failed to inform the authorities.

The 14 were among some 17 defendants all arrested in December 1991 and January 1992 and tried by the State Security Court between 29 February 1992 and 17 March 1992. The trial was held in camera, although some relatives of the defendants were allowed to attend the last session. The defendants were assisted by 11 defence lawyers, all chosen by their families. The evidence produced in court consisted of confessions said to have been extracted under torture and copies of the CDF leaflet of 10 December 1991. Two of the defendants, Aktham Nu'aysa and Nizar Nayyuf, were allegedly subjected to severe torture and were not able to walk into the court room unaided. The prosecution demanded that the defendants be sentenced to death. Defence lawyers requested postponement of trial and adequate time to prepare their case and produce witnesses, but this was not granted.

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The following ten were charged with dissemination of false information and receiving money from abroad and received prison sentences ranging between five and ten years with hard labour and deprivation of their civil rights: Nizar Nayyuf, a 36-year-old sociologist and writer, was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment; Aktham Nu'aysa, a 41-year-old lawyer, Muhammad 'Ali Habib, a 34-year-old lecturer, and 'Afif Muzhir, a 34-year-old jurist, were each sentenced to nine years' imprisonment; Bassam al-Shaykh was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment; Thabit Murad, Hassan 'Ali, Hussam Salama, Jadi' Nawfal and Ya'qub Musa, were each sentenced to five years' imprisonment.

The remaining four, Samir Nu'aysa (a brother of Aktham Nu'aysa), Yasser Askif, Nazim Husayn and Nabil Na'us, were convicted on the charge of the withholding of information and each sentenced to three years' imprisonment.

Amnesty International believes that all 14 prisoners have been convicted and sentenced solely for the non-violent expression of their political beliefs and, as such, is calling for their immediate and unconditional release as prisoners of conscience. Amnesty International is also concerned that they have been tried unfairly and have no right of appeal.

Amnesty International is concerned that the prisoners were tortured and that Nizar Nayyuf and Aktham Nu'aysa are in poor state of health with no access to proper medical care and attention.

Amnesty International has no new information concerning Amjad Bahbuha.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Telegrams/telexes/airmail letters:

- expressing concern at the imprisonment of the 14 prisoners as prisoners of conscience and calling for their immediate and unconditional release;
- expressing concern at reports that the prisoners have been tortured and calling for investigation of these allegations and seeking assurances that they are being treated humanely and are not being subjected to torture or ill-treatment;
- requesting that the prisoners, particularly Nizar Nayyuf and Aktham Nu'aysa, be given prompt access to proper medical care and attention.

APPEALS TO

1) His Excellency
President Hafez al-Assad
Presidential Palace
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic

Your Excellency

Telegrams: President al-Assad, Damascus, Syria

Telexes: 419160 munjed sy

2) His Excellency Muhammad Harba
Minister of the Interior
Ministry of the Interior
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
Telegrams: Interior Minister, Damascus, Syria

Your Excellency

3) His Excellency Khalid al-Ansari
Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
Nasr Street
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
Telegrams: Justice Minister, Damascus, Syria

Your Excellency

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Syria in your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 1 May 1992.