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UAE: Grossly unfair trial of government critics

The conviction today of 68 government critics in the United Arab Emirates shows the authorities' determination to crush any form of dissent, said Amnesty International.

"Not only do the defendants appear to have been targeted simply because of their views, but they have been convicted on bogus charges and denied the basic right to a fair trial. The only thing this trial shows is the fundamental flaws in the UAE justice system," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

The trial was marred by allegations of torture which were blatantly ignored, the rights of defence were flouted, and independent observers were banned from the court room.

While the UAE authorities have trumpeted that all the defendants have had a fair trial, Amnesty International points out that there is no right of appeal.

"The slick PR of the UAE is not enough to hide the fact that the trial was grossly unfair and that fundamental rights have been recklessly disregarded," said Hadj Sahraoui.

While the details of the verdict are not yet known, this morning, the United Arab Emirates State Security Court sentenced 68 of the 94 government critics on trial for allegedly "plotting to overthrow the state" to prison terms of between seven and 15 years. Twenty-six defendants were acquitted, including 13 women. Eight of those tried in absentia received 15-year prison terms.

Among those convicted are a judge, human rights lawyers and teachers, among others. Prominent human rights lawyers, Dr Mohamed al-Mansoori and Dr Mohamed 'Abdullah al-Roken, were sentenced to 10 years in prison and are believed to be prisoners of conscience.

Many of the defendants are believed to be members of the Reform and Social Guidance Association (al-Islah).

Speaking to Amnesty International after the announcement of the verdict, one of those convicted in their absence stated: "I feel sorry for the Emirati people, as the real reason for this politically-motivated trial is now recognised by so many people. It shows that justice remains a long way off in the UAE and that human rights standards now need to have some standing in the UAE."

Some defendants were ordered to pay significant fines in addition to their prison sentences and no investigation into allegations of ill treatment has yet been announced.

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of those imprisoned solely for expressing their views.