

# URGENT ACTION

## HOSPITAL PATIENTS HELD INCOMMUNICADO IN SYRIA

**Dozens of Syrian Kurds injured in clashes with law enforcement officials are being held incommunicado in hospital in the city of Ar Raqqah, northeastern Syria. They are at risk of torture or other ill-treatment.**

On 21 March, violence broke out between Syrian law enforcement officials and members of the Kurdish minority, an estimated 5,000 of whom had gathered in Ar Raqqah to celebrate Nawrouz, the Kurdish New Year. The gathering was organized by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Kurdish minority political party unrecognized by the Syrian authorities. The violence broke out when law enforcement officials objected to those holding up PYD flags and pictures of the 'Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey (PKK), who is imprisoned in Turkey. Police used tear gas and pumped water at the crowds then opened fire with live ammunition when some of the participants threw stones at them, killing a 14-year-old boy and possibly other people, and injuring scores of others.

Many of the injured were taken to Ar Raqqah National Hospital, which has since been surrounded by the security forces who control all exit and entry. To date, only two of the injured have been permitted to receive visits from their families, prompting concern that those to whom access is being denied may be at risk of torture or other ill-treatment.

Since the incident, the security forces are reported to have detained an unknown number of people in the predominantly Kurdish areas of Ar Raqqah on suspicion of participating in the Nawrouz gathering on 21 March.

The Syrian authorities have not made any public comment on the events in Ar Raqqah and no investigation is known to have been opened into allegations that law enforcement used excessive force.

### **PLEASE WRITE IMMEDIATELY in Arabic, English, French or your own language:**

- Expressing concern about the reported killing of a 14-year-old boy and wounding of dozens of other people as a result of live fire by law enforcement officials in Ar Raqqah, and reports that many of those injured are being held under police guard in hospital and denied access to their relatives;
- Urging the authorities to allow all those injured or detained in connection with the 21 March events to have immediate access to their families, to legal counsel of their choice and to any medical care that they require.
- Calling on the authorities to institute immediately an independent investigation into the use of lethal force by law enforcement officials on 21 March and whether this constituted excessive use of force in breach of recognized international standards, and to hold to account any officials responsible for using excessive force;

### **PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 6 MAY 2010 TO:**

#### President

Bashar al-Assad  
 Presidential Palace  
 al-Rashid Street  
 Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic  
 Fax: +963 11 332 3410

**Salutation: Your Excellency**

#### Minister of Interior

Major Sa'id Mohamed Samour  
 Ministry of Interior  
 'Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar Street  
 Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic  
 Fax: +963 11 222 3428

**Salutation: Your Excellency**

#### **And copies to:**

#### Minister of Defence

His Excellency Lieutenant- General Ali  
 Ben-Mohammed Habib Mahmoud  
 Ministry of Defence  
 Omayyad Square  
 Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic

**Fax: +963 11 211972**

**Also send copies to diplomatic representatives of Syria accredited to your country.** Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

**AMNESTY  
 INTERNATIONAL**



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### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The Kurds comprise up to 10 per cent of the population of Syria and live mostly around the city of Aleppo in the north of the country and al-Jazeera region in the north-east. These predominantly Kurdish areas lag behind the rest of the country in terms of social and economic development. Syrian Kurds are subject to identity-based discrimination, including restrictions on the use of their language in schools and the expression of their culture, such as bans on producing and circulating Kurdish music.

Nawrouz – Kurdish New Year - is one of the main events celebrated by members of the Kurdish minority in Syria, and Kurdish political parties usually hold public gatherings to deliver speeches, and sing songs in the Kurdish language.

The Syrian authorities have often suppressed these celebrations by arresting the organizers or the audience. For example, in 2009 around 16 men, mostly members of the unauthorized Yekiti Kurdish Party in Syria, were detained incommunicado for almost two months after peacefully celebrating the Kurdish festival of Nawrouz on 21 March. They were all charged with “inciting sectarian strife”. One of the men, Suleiman ‘Abdelmajid Osso, was also charged with “membership of a secret organization”. They were all released on bail in May and June and their next trial session is due to be held before a military judge in Qamishly on 5 May 2010.

On 21 March this year, around 5,000 Syrian Kurds are reported to have gathered in Ar Raqqah to celebrate Nawrouz in a festival organized by the PYD. PYD members set up a stage from which to deliver speeches and lead the singing of Kurdish nationalist songs and they carried party flags and pictures of ‘Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK in Turkey, who remains imprisoned by the Turkish authorities. Some 200 law enforcement officials were present and monitoring the gathering. Violence broke out when they demanded that PYD members stop displaying their pictures of ‘Abdullah Öcalan and their PYD flags. At first, the law enforcement officials attempted to arrest some of the organizers on the stage and sprayed water and fired tear gas at the demonstrators, then reportedly opened fire using live ammunition when some of the demonstrators began throwing stones. It is unclear whether they issued any warning or ordered the crowd to disperse before resorting to live fire.

Twenty-three Syrian Kurds arrested on 22 March, including four children, were brought before a judge in Ar Raqqah on 23 March. Sixteen of them, including a girl, were conditionally released but still face charges. The girl and the other three children were referred to a juvenile court on charges of physically assaulting a public administration employee, inciting sectarian strife, and causing riots. The charges brought against the adults are not yet known.

On 23 March, officers of the Political Security delivered the body of Mohammed Haider Iben ‘Omar to his family and supervised the burial. It is reported that the family was not permitted to hold a funeral. Syrian-Kurdish human rights organizations claim that Mohammed Haider Iben ‘Omar may have died due to excessive use of force.

The rights to freedom of expression and association are severely restricted in Syria, aided by “state of emergency” laws which have been in force since 1964. Only the Ba’ath Party and some parties linked to it are officially recognized as political parties and human rights organizations are not legally authorized to operate.

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