

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: MDE 28/003/2010

Date: 17 May 2010

### **Algeria: End impunity for abuse of detainees in El Harrach Prison**

Amnesty International urges the Algerian authorities to immediately open an investigation into allegations that detainees in El Harrach Prison in Algiers were subjected to ill-treatment. The concerns of the organization are heightened by the lack of proper investigations into previous reports of abuse of detainees.

On 17 April 2010, two detainees in El Harrach Prison, Khalouf Fares and Nour Abdel Aziz, started a hunger strike, allegedly in protest at their treatment by prison officials. Two others, Yaakoub Bilal and Karman Hurfi, joined the hunger strike several days later. According to information obtained by Amnesty International, the strike was sparked by the actions of the prison guards, including routine verbal abuse of the detainees (all of whom are awaiting trial on terrorism-related charges) such as calling them “terrorists”; stripping them naked in front of other detainees and a large number of guards seemingly to humiliate them; and occasionally slapping them. It is also reported that detainees complained about the prison administration’s decision to deny them family visits as punishment for alleged disciplinary offences and to refuse to give them blankets or other basic necessities. To date, Nour Abdel Aziz and Karman Hurfi are continuing their hunger strike. Khalouf Fares discontinued the strike after his transfer to Berouaguia Prison in Medea province on 6 May, while Yaakoub Bilal stopped due to the deterioration of his health.

Following the publication of articles in the Algerian press about the hunger strike and the decision of the prison administration to place the hunger strikers in solitary confinement, Algerian officials were quoted in an *El Khabar* article published on 12 May under the title “The strike of the prisoners has no relation to detention conditions” denying allegations that prisoners were ill-treated. Officials from the Court of Algiers were quoted saying that prisoners were striking as a result of charges they were facing and that the judge overseeing sentences (juge d’application des peines) received their complaint and visited them in prison.

This is not the first time that El Harrach Prison has come under the spotlight following allegations of torture or other ill-treatment of detainees. For instance on 19 February 2008, at least 30 detainees at El Harrach were reported to have been beaten severely by prison guards after they and other inmates refused to return from the prison yard to the ward of the prison in which they were held in protest at the transformation of their prayer zone into accommodation for more detainees. Detainees were reportedly taken individually or in groups of two or three to a hall where they were stripped naked, kicked, punched, beaten with metal bars, insulted and threatened with sexual abuse. One inmate was said to have sustained a broken leg, another had his jaw fractured, and a third sustained an injury to his nose. No judicial investigation is known to have been conducted into these alleged assaults despite complaints made by the prisoners’ lawyers.

In recent years, Amnesty International has received persistent reports of torture or other ill-treatment in Algeria, particularly at the hands of the Department for Information and Security (Département du renseignement et de la sécurité, DRS) but also at El Harrach Prison. Reports of torture or other ill-treatment have continued even though amendments were introduced in the Algerian Penal Code in 2004 to criminalize torture and extend liability to any public official that uses, incites or orders the use of torture, or is complicit in its use. The vast majority of perpetrators have not been brought to account. In order to break this climate of impunity, Amnesty International urges the Algerian authorities to

immediately investigate allegations that detainees have faced abuse at the hands of officials in El Harrach Prison, and to bring those responsible to account. It also calls on the authorities to ensure that the detainees are treated humanely and protected from torture or other ill-treatment in compliance with Algeria's international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention against Torture and Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, treaties to which Algeria is a state party.

**Background**

It was reported that all four detainees involved in the hunger strike have been previously held incommunicado and allegedly tortured or otherwise ill-treated at the hands of the DRS. For instance, Khalouf Fares complained of torture, including during his first hearing in front of the investigative judge on 30 November 2008, but no investigation into his allegations has been ordered to date. He reportedly still has scars as a result of cigarette burns on his back. The four were arrested at various times since 2007 and are facing terrorism-related charges; but none have been brought to trial.

In another case of alleged torture in the El Harrach Prison, Fatouch El Tahir Yacine reported being tied up, drenched in water and beaten with wooden sticks all over his body, including the soles of his feet, by prison guards in the office of the Director of the First Department of the El Harrach Prison on 30 March 2008. After the beating, he was reportedly placed in solidarity confinement without water or access to the toilet for two days. Even though his lawyer filed a complaints; no independent, full or impartial investigation has been conducted; and no perpetrators have been brought to account.

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