

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: MDE 24/013/2009
12 May 2009

Syria: Jailed Kurdish activist is prisoner of conscience

Amnesty International condemns the sentencing yesterday of Mesh'al al-Tammo, a 51-year-old Kurdish activist, to three and a half years in prison for his political activities. The organization considers him to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for peacefully expressing his political views, and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

On 11 May the Damascus Criminal Court found Mesh'al al-Tammo, who is a member of Syria's Kurdish minority and the spokesperson of the Kurdish Future Current in Syria, an unauthorized political party, guilty of "weakening national sentiments" (Article 285 of the Penal Code) and "broadcasting false or exaggerated news which could affect the morale of the country" (Article 286). The charges related to party documents that were found in his car when he was arrested by Syrian Air Force Security on 15 August 2008.

Mesh'al al-Tammo was arrested at a checkpoint between the northern city of 'Ein al-'Arab, known in Kurdish as Kobani, and his home in the city of Aleppo. His whereabouts remained unknown until his transfer to 'Adra Prison near Damascus on 26 August. Human rights organizations in Syria later learned that, at some point during those 12 days of incommunicado detention, Syrian Air Force Security had handed Mesh'al al-Tammo into the custody of the Political Security Branch in Damascus, which is responsible for investigating the activities of suspected political dissidents.

Amnesty International has serious concerns about both this period of pre-trial detention and the trial proceedings themselves. Mesh'al al-Tammo's lawyers reportedly asked to call a total of seven defence witnesses to give evidence at the trial, but the court failed to respond to the request, meaning that none were able to appear. The right of the accused to call and question witnesses is a cornerstone of the right of defence in a fair trial.

Mesh'al al-Tammo is also a member of the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society, an unauthorized pro-reform network of Syrians who meet to discuss human rights and political matters.

Background

Kurdish human rights defenders and civil society activists, along with those deemed to be associated with Kurdish political parties or groups which raise concerns about the treatment of Kurds in Syria, run a high risk of being arrested by the security forces, which have sweeping powers of arrest and detention. The criminal, military and state security

courts widely interpret loosely defined articles of the Penal Code and frequently hand down severe prison terms to them and other suspected opponents of the state following trial proceedings which fail to meet international standards.

Kurds in Syria also suffer severe discrimination because of their ethnicity. Many of them are denied Syrian nationality and therefore do not receive the full provision of education, employment, health care and other rights enjoyed by Syrian nationals.