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Syria: Dekalbab imprisoned

Amnesty International deplores the sentencing this week of Muhammad Bedia' Dekalbab, a member of the unauthorized National Organization for Human Rights, to six months' imprisonment. Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience, jailed for writing an article criticizing the lack of freedom of expression in Syria, and calls for his immediate and unconditional release.

On 29 June Muhammad Bedia' Dekalbab, aged 59, was found guilty of "spreading false or exaggerated information... that may undermine the prestige of the state" following a trial before the Damascus Military Court. He has been held in 'Adra prison, near Damascus, since his arrest on 2 March 2008. His trial began on 12 May, following which several hearings took place. On 9 June his trial was adjourned because the Military Police failed to bring him to the courtroom from prison.

Another possible prisoner of conscience in Syria, Kareem 'Arabji, a business consultant aged 30, remains detained and on trial before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) charged with "broadcasting false or exaggerated news which would affect the morale of the country". Amnesty International believes the charge is related to his moderating of the Internet youth forum Akhawia, as well as his postings on it. He was arrested on 7 June 2007 and his trial began on 20 April 2008. He last appeared before the SSSC on 8 June, when his trial was adjourned until 20 July 2008.

For more information on both cases, please see Amnesty International's press release *Syria: 'Arabji and Dekalbab facing unfair trials*, 6 June 2008:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/syria-%E2%80%98arabji-and-dekalbab-facing-unfair-trials-20080606>

Background:

A number of other individuals have recently been sentenced to prison terms in Syria for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression. On 23 April 2008 Kamal al-Labwani was found guilty of "broadcasting false or exaggerated news which would affect the morale of the country" on the basis of remarks he

made to a fellow detainee, and was sentenced to a three-year term of imprisonment, thereby extending the 12-year term he is already serving for advocating peaceful reform in Syria. The next day, human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, was sentenced to five years' imprisonment for "spreading false information harmful to the nation", on the basis of a statement he made concerning a death in custody.

In June 2007, seven young men were sentenced to five- and seven-year prison terms for their involvement in developing a youth discussion group and for publishing pro-democracy articles on the Internet. In May 2007, Michel Kilo and Mahmoud 'Issa were convicted of "weakening nationalist sentiments" and sentenced to three years' imprisonment for signing a petition calling for the normalization of relations between Syria and Lebanon.

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