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Syria: Release and drop charges against human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni

Amnesty International today repeated its call to the Syrian authorities to release immediately Anwar al-Bunni when his trial before the Damascus Criminal Court concludes tomorrow, 24 April 2007. The court is due to deliver its verdict at the end of a trial in which Anwar al-Bunni is charged with "spreading false information harmful to the state". He denies the charge but if convicted could receive a sentence of up to three years of imprisonment.

Amnesty International considers Anwar al-Bunni to be a prisoner of conscience who has been tried on a charge that is politically-motivated and was brought against him apparently because of his activities to defend human rights in Syria.

Of some 300 Syrian and Lebanese signatories to a petition, the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, that calls for the normalisation of relations between Syria and Lebanon, 10 were arrested by the Syrian authorities in May last year. The two others still detained and on trial are Michel Kilo and Mahmoud 'Issa who are being tried separately from him. Amnesty International considers all three individuals to be prisoners of conscience detained solely for the peaceful expression of their non-violent ideas and consequently calls for their immediate and unconditional release and for all charges against them to be dropped.

Anwar al-Bunni, Head of the Damascus Centre for Legal Studies and of a European Union-funded human rights centre that was closed down by the authorities shortly after opening in March 2006, has been detained at 'Adra prison, near Damascus, since his arrest on 17 May 2006. He has not been allowed to meet privately with his lawyers and while detained has suffered beatings and been subjected to degrading treatment (see AI, Public Statement, *Syria: Beatings of PoCs must end, officials who have perpetrated or facilitated abuses must be prosecuted*, MDE 24/008/2007, 15 February 2007). In addition, the Minister for Social Affairs and Labour has called for him to be stripped of his citizenship.

Nonetheless, Anwar al-Bunni has continued to champion human rights from behind bars, including last week sending a letter to President Bashar al-Assad calling for him to set up an investigation into prison conditions, noting that the six thousand prisoners in 'Adra are routinely subjected to beatings, insults and terror, and prevented from leaving their cells, watching TV and listening to the radio.

Background

For many years Anwar al-Bunni has taken up cases of prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners, and spoken out on human rights issues in the country. As an apparent consequence of this work to promote and protect human rights he has been subjected to various forms of harassment including being summoned

to meetings with the security forces, facing disciplinary measures from the Damascus Bar Association, and being prevented from travel abroad.

Trials of possible political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Syria, whether before the Criminal, Military, State Security or Field Military Courts, invariably fall short of international standards for fair trials. They lack independence, are widely perceived to be influenced by the security forces and the executive, and defendants have restricted access to their lawyers. Reports of torture and other forms of ill-treatment of detainees are almost never investigated by the courts, including when defendants claim that “confessions” they made were extracted under duress.

Among other Amnesty International documents on the persecution of the signatories to the Beirut-Damascus Declaration see: *Syria: Another wave of arrests of human rights defenders and civil society activists*, MDE 24/038/2006, 17 May 2006; *Syria: Dismissal of state employees for expressing opinions violates international human rights*, MDE 24/045/2006, 21 June 2006; *Syria: Beatings of PoCs must end, officials who have perpetrated or facilitated abuses must be prosecuted*, MDE 24/008/2007, 15 February 2007; *Syria: Unfair trials and ill-treatment in detention of peaceful “Beirut-Damascus Declaration” petitioners*, MDE 24/022/2007, 11 April 2007.