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Libya: Releases welcome but other prisoners of conscience should also be freed

The recent release by the Libyan authorities of five long-term prisoners of conscience was an encouraging step, Amnesty International said today, and raised hopes that other long-held prisoners of conscience will also soon be freed.

The five prisoners who were released on 10 and 11 September – Ramadan Shaglouf, Tariq al-Dernawi, Tawfiq al-Jehani, Ali Be'aou and Musa al-Ziwi – had all been held since 1998. They were serving prison terms up to life after being convicted of belonging to the Islamic Alliance Movement, a banned political group, but were considered prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International. While welcoming their releases, the organization expressed concern that the five were released reportedly only after pledging that they would not undertake any political activities, and called for this restriction to be lifted.

The recent releases follow increasing speculation that the Libyan authorities are preparing to release scores of other political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience. In particular, a committee established at the behest of Libyan leader Colonel Mu'ammarr al-Gaddafi reportedly concluded recently that some 85 imprisoned members of the Libyan Islamic Group (also known as the Muslim Brothers) had neither used nor advocated violence and should be released. Many of them have been held since June 1998.

Amnesty International said it was particularly concerned about two other prisoners who are apparently held for peaceful expression of their opinions but who do not appear to be among those mooted for release, Fathi el-Jahmi and Abdurrazig al-Mansouri.

Political activist Fathi el-Jahmi has been detained without trial since March 2004, when he was arrested after he criticized the Leader of the Revolution and called for political reform in international media interviews. He is currently held at an undisclosed location understood to be a special facility of the Internal Security Agency on the outskirts of Tripoli, and there are serious concerns about the conditions and his treatment in detention. In February 2005, he was in ill-health, suffering from diabetes and other ailments, but receiving inadequate medical treatment. Since June 2005, he has reportedly been denied any family visits or access to receive mail or reading materials. He is believed now to be awaiting trial under Articles 166 and 167 of the Penal Code, charged with seeking to overthrow the government, slandering the Leader of the Revolution and contacting foreign authorities. However, Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

Writer and journalist Abdurrazig al-Mansouri has been detained without charge or trial since his arrest on 12 January 2005 at his home in Tobruk. After an initial period of incommunicado detention in an undisclosed location believed to be a facility of the Internal Security Agency, Abdurrazig al-Mansouri was reportedly transferred to Abu Salim Prison in Tripoli.

Although Abdurrazig al-Mansouri has reportedly not been permitted access to a lawyer, nor been informed by a judicial authority of the charges against him, sources close to the authorities have indicated that he has been charged with possession of an unlicensed weapon. However, Amnesty International has noted reports that the Internal Security Agency found the weapon at Abdurrazig al-Mansouri's house the day after his arrest, raising questions about the real reasons behind his detention.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned that Abdurrazig al-Mansouri may have been detained because of his writing on political and human rights issues, including articles critical of the Libyan authorities which appeared on the www.akhbar-libya.com website, and that he may therefore be a prisoner of conscience held solely for the non-violent exercise of his right to freedom of expression. If this is the case, Amnesty International calls on the Libyan authorities to release Abdurrazig al-Mansouri immediately and unconditionally.

Amnesty International previously wrote to the Libyan authorities on 19 August 2005 to express concern that Abdurrazig al-Mansouri was being denied adequate medical care after reportedly falling from his prison bunk bed and breaking his pelvis around 7 August 2005. It is imperative that he is given immediate access to adequate medical treatment for such injuries.