

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: MDE 24/036/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 150
1 June 2005

Syria: Leading Islamic cleric “tortured to death”

A prominent Islamic religious leader has been tortured to death, according to information received by Amnesty International. Sheikh Muhammad Ma'shuq al-Khiznawi died on 30 May, 20 days after he “disappeared”, apparently detained by Syrian Military Intelligence at an unknown location.

"The Syrian authorities should launch an immediate, independent investigation into Sheikh Muhammad Ma'shuq al-Khiznawi's death in custody," said Neil Sammonds, Syria Researcher at Amnesty International. "The results must be made public and those responsible for his torture should be brought to justice."

Sheikh Muhammad Ma'shuq al-Khiznawi was an outspoken member of the Kurdish community who practised as an imam in the city of Qamishli in north-eastern Syria. He was a critic of violence and terrorism and recently called for reforms in Syria and for more dialogue between religious groups. In February and March 2005 he travelled to Norway, Brussels, and Germany, apparently in connection with his work on building relations between the EU and Kurdish community.

Sheikh Muhammad Ma'shuq al-Khiznaw "disappeared" after leaving the Centre for Islamic Studies in Damascus on 10 May. The Syrian authorities denied that they were holding him but then handed over his body to his family earlier today. It was being taken back to Qamishli to be buried this evening. The family and body were accompanied by ten Military Intelligence cars on the journey between Damascus and Qamishli, according to witnesses.

Background

According to Amnesty International's information, Sheikh Muhammad Ma'shuq al-Khiznawi is at least the sixth Syrian Kurd to have died as a result of torture and ill-treatment in custody since March 2004. Amnesty International has not received information about any investigations into any of these deaths in custody, nor into any other of the scores of allegations of torture that it has received over many years. The organisation knows of no cases in which officials responsible for torture have been prosecuted. More than 2,000 people, almost all of them Kurds, were arrested in the wake of March 2004 disturbances. Most of these were held incommunicado at unknown locations, and about 100 remain in detention.

For further information, see Amnesty International's March 2005 report, *Syria: Kurds in the Arab Republic one year after the March 2004 event*, at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde240022005>.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>