

PUBLIC

AI Index: MDE 24/077/2005

31 August 2005

UA 223/05 Fear of torture/Incommunicado detention/health concern/unfair trial/possible prisoner of conscience

SYRIA Riad Drar al-Hamood (m), aged 51, Arabic language teacher, active member of the Committees for Revival of Civil Society

Civil society activist Riyad Drar al-Hamood was arrested on 4 June, and is held incommunicado in solitary confinement at 'Adra prison, near the capital, Damascus. He is at serious risk of torture. He is suffering from diabetes-related high blood pressure, for which he requires medication. It is not known whether this is being provided; without it his life is in danger. He received one visit after his arrest, but is since then no one has been allowed to see him, including his doctor.

Riad Drar al-Hamood was arrested after he made a speech at the funeral of the prominent Islamic scholar Sheikh Muhammad Ma'shuq al-Khiznawi, who had been abducted and tortured to death. Two hours after he was arrested, security officers raided his house and confiscated books and copies of his lectures.

He has reportedly been charged with "inciting sectarian strife", a charge commonly used against human rights defenders and activists who seek to promote the rights of Syrian Kurds. He is to be tried by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), whose procedures fall far short of international standards for fair trial.

Riad Drar al-Hamood is an active member of the Committees for Revival of Civil Society, an unauthorised network of people engaging in human rights-related and political discussion.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A noted moderate, Sheikh Muhammad Ma'shuq al-Khiznawi was abducted on 10 May by people believed to be agents of Military Intelligence. His body was handed over to his family on 1 June by Military Intelligence, who claimed he had been murdered by criminal suspects. For further details see UA 131/05 (MDE 24/027/2005, 19 May 2005) and *Syria: Leading Islamic cleric "tortured to death"* (MDE 24/036/2005, 1 June 2005).

Trials before the SSSC fall far below international fair trial standards. Defendants do not have the right of appeal, and have restricted access to their lawyers; and "confessions" allegedly extracted under torture are admissible as evidence. The UN Human Rights Committee has stated that the SSSC's procedures are incompatible with the provisions of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, to which Syria is a state party.

Two leading members of the Committees for Revival of Civil Society, academic Dr 'Aref Dalilah and former MP Riad Seif, are prisoners of conscience. They were arrested in 2001 and sentenced after unfair trials in 2002, to 10 and five years' imprisonment respectively. In September 2001 Riad Seif hosted a political seminar at which political reform and democratic elections were called for, and in March 2001 he had issued a discussion paper on the principles of an organization he was apparently planning to set up, *Harakat al Silm*, Social Peace Movement. Dr 'Aref Dalilah was arrested on account of his outspoken views against corruption and his calls for freedom of expression to complement economic reform. He was also said to have taken part in the political seminar hosted by Riad Seif.

'Aref Dalilah, now 63, was tried by the SSSC on a charge of "attempting to change the Constitution by illegal means". Riad Seif, now 59, was tried by the Criminal Court of Damascus on a number of charges including "attempting to change the Constitution by illegal means" and "inciting sectarian strife". Both are held in 'Adra

prison, have suffered ill-treatment and are in need of medical assistance. Riad Seif requires open heart surgery and Dr 'Aref Dalilah, who has reportedly been on hunger strike since 12 July, has deep vein thrombosis. (For details see the report, *Smothering freedom of expression: the detention of peaceful critics*, MDE 24/007/2002, June 2002; UA 226/01, MDE 24/029/2001, 7 September 2001 and follow-ups; and Medical Action, *Health concern: six imprisoned human rights defenders*, MDE 24/054/2005 25 July 2005).

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English, Arabic, French or your own language:

- calling on the authorities to release Riad Drar al-Hamood immediately, as he appears to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful expression of his views;
- expressing concern that Riad Drar al-Hamood is being held incommunicado and is suffering from diabetes-related high blood pressure, and asking that he be allowed visits from his family, a lawyer of his choice and all the medical attention he needs;
- seeking assurances that Riad Drar al-Hamood is not being tortured or ill-treated;
- reminding the authorities that torture is, as stated by the UN's Special Rapporteur on Torture, "most frequently practised during incommunicado detention [which] should be made illegal, and persons held incommunicado should be released without delay";
- reminding the authorities that Riad Drar al-Hamood is entitled to a fair hearing in line with international standards for fair trial.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency President Bashar al-Assad
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Presidential Palace
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Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
Fax: + 963 11 332 3410
Salutation: Your Excellency

His Excellency General Ghazi Kan'an
Minister of Interior, Ministry of Interior
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Fax + 963 11 222 3428
Salutation: Your Excellency

His Excellency Muhammad al-Ghafari
Minister of Justice, Ministry of Justice
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Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
Fax: + 963 11 222 3428
Salutation: Your Excellency

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Syria accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 12 October 2005.