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24 September 2020

Subject: 31 human rights groups call for urgent response to the Algerian government's intensifying crackdown on civil society and journalists amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

We, the undersigned regional and international non-governmental organisations, write to draw your attention to the alarming and the intensified crackdown on Algerian civil society, targeting peaceful activists and journalists, including with arbitrary detention. We urge you to address these worrying developments, and to:

- Strongly condemn the arbitrary and unlawful arrest, detention and judicial harassment of journalists, human rights defenders, civil society and other peaceful activists solely for expressing their views, for protesting peacefully and/or calling for democratic change;
- Call on the Algerian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release these individuals, arbitrarily detained;
- Call on authorities to cease all judicial harassment and intimidation against them; and
- Call on Algeria to ensure and guarantee the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly as included in the Algerian Constitution, in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) ratified by Algeria.

Illustrative of this crackdown, in August, two journalists - Abdelkrim Zeghileche and Khaled Drareni – were sentenced respectively to two and three years in prison. Drareni's appeal is set for [8 September](#). Human rights defender and activist Abdullah Benaoum has remained in pre-trial detention since December 2019, despite a very [critical health condition](#). Opposition figure Amira Bouraoui was sentenced to [a year in prison](#) on 21 June and is awaiting her appeal on 24 September. On

https://www.facebook.com/LADDH/posts/10157120845966759?_xts=%5b0%5d=68.ARAJhUaN986PswBIFOgCiCi4FweeS756tYqlyUJpeGRvHGXMM_Rbs06L-V-0SAduQk8LVCRyAw9oJ9-_6H1zzTdfB3Q1YYIc_U6pBmYcnQClu8wzanU24V5yYziURYQ_77pdMc0fXVdZBUUpMvC6cShzQE_W98VEN7ZUYrOQR6BbpjpxkJxO5bZfCjT5IEW0qGFoy_QXMj7yqq_4CI11HRajhvi7dl28BLReH4EFI_C80V1jS6eknq5yDSAC8kOwkpnITAIYn98dUolx5oqhlSFsM1MypM1R-ijzc03nQDmg64U4oZ67k0p4ov_4buHloo2Hy19YH96_QMLFacA9dEO&_tn=-R19_June_2020, about 500 peaceful protesters were subjected to mass arbitrary detentions.

The Algerian authorities' relentless prosecution and harassment of civil society and journalists undermines human rights as the country undertakes its democratic transition process, ahead of a [constitutional referendum](#) to be held on November 1st, endangers the health of individuals detained given the heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 in the midst of an outbreak of the

virus in Algerian prisons. This risk is illustrated by [the recent death of two detainees](#) and the infection of at least eight others.

In the 44th HRC session, civil society organisations urged the Council to increase its scrutiny of the situation in Algeria, knowing that within less than a month - between 30 March and 16 April 2020 - three [communications](#) were sent to the Algerian government by multiple special procedures in relation to arbitrary and violent arrests, unfair trials and reprisals against human rights defenders and peaceful activists. Despite these communications, and while President Tebboune announced his support for an open dialogue with the Hirak and [his desire to break with previous repressive practices](#) following controversial elections in December 2019, the reality on the ground shows that the level of repression has increased drastically.

We therefore call on you to raise these pressing and worrying developments in order to protect Algerian civil society as it strives to protect its democratic transition, and its freedom of assembly and expression.

We thank you for your consideration and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

- Adil Soz
- Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC)
- Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC)
- Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)
- Amnesty International
- Article 19
- Bytes for All (B4A)
- Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
- Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM)
- Cartoonist's Rights Network International (CRNI)
- Civicus
- Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)
- Committee for the Respect of Liberties and Human Rights in Tunisia
- Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
- Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)
- Globe International Center
- Initiative for Freedom of Expression (IFoX) - Turkey
- International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
- International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)
- International Press Centre (IPC)
- International Press Institute (IPI)
- International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
- Maharat Foundation
- Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)
- Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA)
- Media, Entertainment & Artis Alliance (MEAA)

- Metamorphosis
- Pacific Islands News Association (PINA)
- Reporters without Borders (RSF)
- South East Europe Media Organization (SEEMO)
- World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC)

Context

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, and the suspension of the peaceful protest movement called the Hirak, **Algerian authorities have accelerated arbitrary prosecutions and harassment of journalists, peaceful activists, rights defenders, and citizens expressing dissenting opinions.** Between March and June 2020, local rights groups estimate that at least <http://www.rfi.fr/en/wires/20200619-algeria-cracks-down-activists-bid-break-protest-movement200-people> were subjected to arbitrary arrests for expressing their opinion or for their alleged support to the Hirak, while more than 1,400 were prosecuted in relation to the protests since the start of the Hirak movement in February 2019. As of 25 August, and according to the National Committee for the Release of Detainees (CNLD), at least [44 people](#) are behind bars after being arbitrarily detained for expressing their opinion, and a number of them are in pre-trial detention. On [https://www.facebook.com/LADDH/posts/10157120845966759?_xts__\[5b0%5d=68.ARAJhUaN986PswBIFOGciCI4FweeS756tYqlyUJpeGRvHGXMM_Rbs06L-V-0SAduQk8LVCRyAw9oJ9-_6H1zzTdFB3Q1YYIc_U6pBmYcnQClu8wzanU24V5yYziURYQ_77pdMc0fXVdZBUUpMvC6cShzQE_W98VEN7ZUYrOQR6BbpjpxkJxO5bZfCjT5IEW0qGFoy_QXMj7yqq_4CI11HRajhvi7dl28BLReH4EFI_C80V1jS6ekng5yDSAC8kOwkpnITAIYn98dUolx5oqhISFsM1MypM1R-jizc03nQDmg64U4oZ67k0p4ov_4buHloo2Hy19YH96_QMLFacA9dEO&_tn_=-R19_June_2020](https://www.facebook.com/LADDH/posts/10157120845966759?_xts__[5b0%5d=68.ARAJhUaN986PswBIFOGciCI4FweeS756tYqlyUJpeGRvHGXMM_Rbs06L-V-0SAduQk8LVCRyAw9oJ9-_6H1zzTdFB3Q1YYIc_U6pBmYcnQClu8wzanU24V5yYziURYQ_77pdMc0fXVdZBUUpMvC6cShzQE_W98VEN7ZUYrOQR6BbpjpxkJxO5bZfCjT5IEW0qGFoy_QXMj7yqq_4CI11HRajhvi7dl28BLReH4EFI_C80V1jS6ekng5yDSAC8kOwkpnITAIYn98dUolx5oqhISFsM1MypM1R-jizc03nQDmg64U4oZ67k0p4ov_4buHloo2Hy19YH96_QMLFacA9dEO&_tn_=-R19_June_2020), about 500 peaceful protesters were subjected to mass arbitrary detentions.

Among those recently sentenced or prosecuted:

- Political activist Samir Ben Larbi and national coordinator of the families of the disappeared Slimane Hamitouche (subject of a joint [communication](#) from UN Special Procedures), were [sentenced](#) on 10 August to two years in prison over online publications and their participation in peaceful protests.
- On 21 June, Amira Bouraoui, activist and opposition figure, was [sentenced to a year in prison](#) after criticizing President Tebboune online. She is awaiting her appeal, scheduled to take place on 24 September 2020.
- The pre-trial detention of Walid Kechida, creator of a satirical Facebook page, [arrested](#) in April for "contempt and offense to the President" and "attack on the divine entity", was renewed on 27 August 2020 for another 4 months.
- Activist Abdullah Benaoum's health is in [critical condition](#). He has remained in pre-trial detention since his participation in a peaceful demonstration in December 2019, although he suffers from a heart condition requiring an urgent surgical intervention. His petition for a [pretrial release was rejected](#) again on 2 September.

Peaceful activists and journalists are sentenced on vague charges such as "weakening the morale of the army", "undermining national unity" or "offending the President", all stemming

from exercising their right to free speech or peaceful assembly. The National Union of Magistrates (SNM) has recently denounced the [abusive recourse to pre-trial detention](#).

In addition, authorities have continued to clamp down on freedom of information by blocking news websites and multiplying the prosecution of journalists. In April 2020, the Parliament hurriedly passed vaguely worded [amendments](#) to the Penal Code allowing for people exercising free speech to be charged with “spreading false news”, harming “national unity” and “public order”, punishable by one to three years in prison. At least [six online news](#) websites covering the COVID-19 pandemic and the Hirak protests were made unavailable on Algerian networks in April and May. Two of them were blocked four days after the editor-in-chief of both websites published an [op-ed](#) criticizing President Abdelmadjid Tebboune’s first 100 days in office. Minister of Communication Amar Belhimer [admitted](#) that the authorities, without prior notification, had blocked them pending “further legal proceedings” against the director for “defamation and insult” against President Tebboune.

Among the journalists targeted:

- Reporter Abdelkrim Zeghileche was [sentenced to two years](#) in prison on 24 August 2020 after he called for the creation of a new political party and criticized President Tebboune. He was accused of “endangering national unity” and “insulting the head of state”;
- Journalist Khaled Drareni, correspondent for TV5Monde and Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Director of the Casbah Tribune, was [sentenced to three years](#) in prison over his reporting on the Hirak protest movement on 10 August 2020;
- On 28 July 2020, Algerian authorities [detained](#) Moncef Aït Kaci, a former France 24 correspondent, Ramdane Rahmouni, a freelance producer and camera operator, and Mustapha Bendjama, a local journalist and advocate for the freedom of the press. They were released temporarily pending investigation, and Bendjama continues to face inappropriate criminal charges.
- After a one-day trial, in April 2020, Algerian authorities also [charged](#) three journalists with “attack on national unity” over their reporting on the coronavirus pandemic.

Furthermore, members of the judiciary who demand respect for judicial independence have been sanctioned professionally. On February 10, the Justice Ministry ordered the [arbitrary transfer](#) of prosecutor Mohamed Belhadi 600 kilometers south of Algiers, after Belhadi requested the acquittal of 16 protesters. The spokesperson for the Algerian Magistrates Association, Saad Eddine Merzouk and other judges who called for the protection of judiciary independence, were summoned in an extraordinary session before the Superior Judicial Council on 1 June 2020. Back in November 2019, police had forcefully dislodged a peaceful gathering of magistrates on strike, in a courthouse in Oran, over the reshuffling of judicial positions.