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@HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN LIBYA DETERIORATES

AFTER FAILURE OF REFORMS, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SAYS

Amnesty International said today that the human rights situation in Libya has deteriorated since 1988, when 400 political prisoners were freed in an amnesty and legal reforms to safeguard human rights were introduced or promised.

"Hundreds of political prisoners have been jailed in the past two years, including prisoners of conscience," the worldwide human rights organization said. "Arbitrary arrests and secret incommunicado detention are continuing, unaffected by any legislation."

Amnesty International said that the Libyan authorities have not responded to repeated appeals by the organization about wide-ranging concerns for more than two years.

"Urgent action is needed by the government to free prisoners of conscience and prevent the imprisonment of people for the peaceful expression of their beliefs," the organization said.

Amnesty International's latest report says that over 450 political prisoners are still being held, including five known prisoners of conscience.

The five - Al Akrami, Al Azhari, Al Qajji, Al Qasbi and Al Tarhouni - have been in prison since 1973. All were charged with membership of a banned political party and given long jail sentences after unfair trials. Their sentences were later increased to life imprisonment by the Revolutionary Command Council, then Libya's highest authority. They were not allowed to appeal.

Amnesty International has been campaigning for the release of these men for more than 10 years. "Their exclusion from the 1988 amnesty and their continued imprisonment symbolise the failure of the promised reforms to protect human rights in Libya," the organization said.

The majority of political prisoners now in jail were arrested after 1988, when Colonel Gaddafi pledged to introduce legal reforms to make Libya a place where "human rights are respected".

"Nearly 400 political prisoners arrested between January 1989 and April 1990 are being held incommunicado and have not been tried. The whereabouts of most are not even known to their families," Amnesty International said.

"Prisoners are extremely vulnerable to torture and ill-treatment when held in such conditions."

A further 30 political prisoners are known to have been held continuously since their arrests between 1970 and 1986. Of these, 23 have never been tried and one has remained in prison despite being tried and acquitted in 1985.

Amnesty International's latest report again called on the Libyan government to free all prisoners of conscience and ensure prompt and fair trial for all political prisoners.

The report also outlines a set of recommendations designed to bring Libya's legislation and practice into line with international human rights standards. The organization urged the Libyan authorities to give immediate consideration to the implementation of these recommendations.

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