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SYRIA: Amnesty International welcomes the release of five prisoners of conscience

Amnesty International welcomes the recent release of Jadi' Nawfal, Ya'qub Musa, Hassan 'Ali, Hussam Salama and Thabit Murad -- five human rights defenders who served their five year prison sentences in Sednaya Prison, Syria.

"These men were arrested simply for defending human rights in Syria and should never have been imprisoned in the first place," Amnesty International said today. "We are now calling on the Syrian authorities to immediately release the five remaining prisoners of conscience who were arrested during the same period."

The five men were arrested with 12 others by the Syrian Military Intelligence between December 1991 and January 1992 in connection with the Committees for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights (CDF), a voluntary and unofficial organization set up in 1989. The arrests were prompted by a leaflet issued and distributed by the CDF on 10 December 1991, human rights day, containing criticism of human rights violations in Syria and the re-election of President Hafez al-Assad at the beginning of December 1991.

The 17 CDF members were charged with dissemination of false information and receiving money from abroad. They were tried by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) in an unfair trial. The SSSC is not bound by the Syrian Code of Criminal Procedures and its verdicts are not subject to appeal. On 17 March 1992 three of the defendants were acquitted and four were sentenced to three years' imprisonment but were released at the end of May 1992. The remaining 10 were sentenced to prison terms ranging from five to 10 years.

Jadi' Nawfal, Ya'qub Musa, Hassan 'Ali, Hussam Salama and Thabit Murad were sentenced to five years each. After their sentences expired, they were transferred to an interrogation centre for several weeks before they were released.

Nizar Nayyuf, sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, Aktham Nu'aysa, Muhammad 'Ali Habib and 'Afif Muzhir, each sentenced to nine years, and Bassam al-Shaykh sentenced to eight years, remain in prison. Aktham Nu'aysa and Nizar Nayyuf were allegedly subjected to torture during pre-trial detention. Aktham Nu'aysa is reported to be in a deteriorating medical condition. Nizar Nayyuf was reportedly transferred to al-Mezze Prison, while the rest are detained at Sednaya Prison.

Amnesty International is calling on the Syrian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Nizar Nayyuf, Aktham Nu'aysa, Muhammad 'Ali Habib, 'Afif Muzhir and Bassam al-Shaykh and all other remaining prisoners of conscience in Syria.

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