

PUBLIC

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31 July 2008

UA 211/08 Fear of torture or other ill-treatment

SYRIA Usama 'Ashour (m), aged 48, Agronomist

Usama 'Ashour, a political activist, was arrested on 29 July by Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) at his house in Aleppo city. He is being detained incommunicado at the Military Security Branch in Aleppo, and is at risk of torture or other ill-treatment. He may be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression and association.

The Syrian authorities have not provided a reason for arresting Usama 'Ashour, and no charges are known to have been brought against him. His arrest may be related to his attendance at a meeting of the pro-democracy umbrella group, Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (DDDNC), on 1 December 2007 as a representative of the Free Nationalists' Coalition, a political organisation which is not officially authorised in Syria. At the meeting, those attending elected a General Secretariat for the DDDNC; since the meeting, many of those who attended it have been arrested. Most have been released after being detained for a few days but 13 others, in addition to Usama 'Ashour, are still in custody. Twelve of these have now been charged with various offences and appeared in court in Damascus on 30 July. A number of the DDDNC detainees are reported to have been beaten or otherwise ill-treated in detention.

Usama 'Ashour was imprisoned for 16 years from 1982 until 1998 following an unfair trial before the Syrian Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) for his membership in the unauthorized Syrian Communist Labour Party. He was also detained for one day in December 2007 apparently in connection with the DDDNC meeting on 1 December 2007. He is also a member of the Committees for the Revival of the Civil Society, an unauthorised pro-reform network of Syrian individuals engaging in human rights-related and political discussion.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

More than 50 people have been detained in connection with the DDDNC meeting on 1 December 2007. The arrests began on 9 December 2008 and Usama 'Ashour's arrest on 29 July is the most recent. In all 50 DDDNC members are known to have been arrested, of whom 36 have been released without charge. Twelve others appeared for the first time before the Damascus Criminal Court yesterday, 30 July, on charges of "broadcasting false or exaggerated news which would affect the morale of the country", "weakening national sentiment", "forming an organization with the purpose of changing the economic or social status of the state" and "inciting racial or sectarian strife". All 12 defendants denied the charges and the trial was then adjourned until 26 August. For further information on the other DDDNC defendants see UA 333/07 and subsequent follow ups and UA 53/08 (MDE 24/011/2008, 26 February 2008).

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

- expressing concern that Usama 'Ashour has been detained incommunicado since 29 July;
- calling on the authorities to release Usama 'Ashour immediately unless he is to be charged with a recognizably criminal offence;

- calling on the authorities to guarantee that he will not be tortured or otherwise ill-treated, and reminding them that Syria is a state party to the UN Convention against Torture;
- urging the authorities to allow Usama 'Ashour to receive visits from his family and have access to a lawyer of his choosing and any medical treatment he may require.

APPEALS TO:

President

His Excellency Bashar al-Assad
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Fax: + 963 11 332 3410

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Interior

His Excellency Major General Bassam Abdel Majid
Ministry of Interior

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Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Justice

His Excellency Muhammad al-Ghafari
Ministry of Justice

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Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Foreign Affairs

His Excellency Walid Mu'allim
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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 11 September 2008.