

PUBLIC

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UA 248/04 Prisoners of conscience/ torture or ill-treatment/ medical concern  
2004

16 August

SYRIA Haythem Muhammed Yasin al-Hamwi (m) aged 28, University teaching assistant  
Muhammed Khaled Shehada (m) aged 26, English graduate doing military service  
Yahya Taha Sharabajee (m) aged 26, accountant  
Mu'atez Muhammed Zuheyr Murad (m) aged 28, mechanical engineer

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The four men named above have reportedly been subjected to torture and ill-treatment since their arrests and detention in May 2003. They are being held in conditions which are said to be extremely unhealthy, dehumanising and degrading. They have spent prolonged periods incommunicado and three of the men have only been allowed only one visit during 15 months' detention, whilst one has received no visits at all. The men are reported to be infested with lice and are allowed to take a cold shower only once or twice a month.

With at least eight deaths in custody reported this year in Syria due to torture and/or the denial of medical treatment, there are heightened concerns for the health and safety of the men, whom Amnesty International considers to be prisoners of conscience. During over 15 months in detention, Muhammed Shehada, Mu'atez Murad and Haythem al-Hamwi have been allowed one visit and Yahya Sharabajee has received no visits at all. Haythem al-Hamwi was reportedly beaten by guards during his visit.

Muhammed Shehada, Mu'atez Murad, Haythem al-Hamwi and Yahya Sharabajee were arrested in May 2003 after participating in a silent march protesting the invasion of Iraq. On 1 April 2004, a secret Field Military Court, whose procedures fall far short of international standards for fair trials, including the denial of legal representation for defendants, sentenced Muhammed Shehada and Mu'atez Murad to three years imprisonment and Haythem al-Hamwi and Yahya Sharabajee to four years for "attempting to establish a religious organisation, involvement in unlicensed social activities and attending unlicensed religious and intellectual classes".

Prior to their arrest, the men had participated in voluntary activities, including establishing a free library, cleaning up their town of Darya, just south-east of the capital Damascus, protesting against the invasion of Iraq and encouraging people to stop smoking.

In various detention centres and now in Sednaya Prison, the men have been subjected to various forms of torture and ill-treatment, including: threats and insults; having their fingers crushed; beatings to their face and legs; having cold water thrown over them or their blankets; being forced to stand for long periods during the night; hearing loud screams and beatings of other detainees; sleep deprivation; being stripped naked in front of others; and being prevented from praying, or growing a beard.

They have been held in harsh conditions and have either been crammed with 30 others into communal cells of 5m x 5m, or have spent prolonged periods in solitary confinement. Haythem al-Hamwi is said to have been held incommunicado, in solitary confinement, for over 6 months. This was reportedly a punishment for replying to a military judge, who had asked him if he would ask for mercy to which he replied: "No, I will ask for justice."

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

- expressing concern that Muhammed Shehada, Mu'atez Murad, Haythem al-Hamwi and Yahya Sharabajee have spent over 15 months as prisoners of conscience, held solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression;
- expressing concern that they have all been tortured and ill-treated;
- expressing concern that they were unfairly tried by a secret Field Military Court, and have been granted no legal representation;
- expressing concern that Muhammed Shehada, Mu'atez Murad, Haythem al-Hamwi have been allowed only one visit during 15 months' detention, and that Yahya Sharabajee has not been allowed any visits;
- requesting that they be treated humanely while in detention, and that they be granted access to their families, lawyers, and any medical attention they may require;
- requesting that the four men be released immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience.

**APPEALS TO:**

His Excellency President Bashar al-Assad  
President of the Republic  
Presidential Palace  
Abu Rummaneh, Al-Rashid Street  
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic  
**Fax: + 963 11 332 3410**  
**Telex: 419160 PRESPL SY**  
**Salutation: Your Excellency**

His Excellency Major General Ali Hammud  
Minister of the Interior  
Ministry of Interior  
Merjeh Circle  
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic  
**Fax: + 963 11 222 3428**  
**Telex: 411016 AFIRS SY**  
**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 27 September 2004.