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TUNISIA: AMNESTY CONDEMNS THE ARREST OF THE PRESIDENT OF ITS TUNISIAN SECTION

Amnesty International today condemned the arrest on two separate occasions on 8 and 9 March of the President of its Section in Tunisia.

Hechmi Jegham, a lawyer by profession, was detained for three hours on 8 March and a further four-and-a-half hours on 9 March at the Central Police station in Sousse. On both occasions he was arrested without a warrant and interrogated about his participation in a legal conference scheduled to take place in Tunisia on 17 March.

He was also questioned and about his contacts with social, humanitarian and judicial organizations abroad and was told that he should notify the Tunisian authorities of any contacts with such organizations in the future.

This latest arrest is yet another example of the Tunisian government's systematic harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and lawyers,' Amnesty International said.

The members of Amnesty International Tunisia do not work on human rights violations within their country. By harassing them in this way, the government is hindering their important work for the victims of grave human rights abuses in many countries around the world.'

During the past few years the Tunisian authorities have restricted Amnesty International Tunisia's work by actions such as intercepting and confiscating mail, cutting telephone lines and preventing it from holding meetings and other events. In 1996, the authorities arrested a Tunisian member of staff of the International Secretariat of Amnesty International when he visited Tunisia with his family for holidays, and held him for a week in secret detention in the Ministry of the Interior.

Human rights defenders, lawyers, and families of victims and prisoners, as well as former prisoners are subjected to growing repression. The government has also targeted international human rights organizations and foreign journalists, by denying them access to Tunisia or preventing them from meeting people and going about their work, and by expelling several from the country.

This clampdown shows that the gap between the Tunisian authorities'

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human rights rhetoric and their daily practice continues to widen, leaving more and more people vulnerable to repression,' Amnesty International said.

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