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TUNISIA: THE WIDENING CIRCLE OF REPRESSION

The human rights situation in Tunisia remains a source of concern, despite the recent release of some prisoners of conscience. The circle of repression continues to widen. Victims of arbitrary detention, torture or ill-treatment and imprisonment after unfair trials are not only political opponents: Human rights defenders and activists, trade unionists, and wives and relatives of political prisoners and refugees are increasingly targeted.

Public liberties, already much restricted in the last few years, have been further curtailed. Human rights defenders and activists find it increasingly difficult to carry out their activities. In the past few years human rights defenders have been arrested, imprisoned, tortured, intimidated and harassed for their work on behalf of the most vulnerable victims.

“If pressure and harassment are not enough to intimidate human rights defenders, the Tunisian authorities use other methods, such as imprisonment and torture. Often they also confiscate their passports, disconnect their telephone and intercept their mail so as to cut them off from the outside world,” Amnesty International said today.

In a 19-page report published today Amnesty International shows the gap which exists between the discourse of the Tunisian authorities, who continue to reiterate their commitment to respecting human rights, and a reality where the most fundamental rights are violated daily.

An increasing number of people, including many women and even children, are subjected to retaliation because of their family links with political opponents. Wives of Islamist political prisoners and refugees are the first victims of this repression. Their freedom of conscience and of movement are restricted, their physical and mental integrity and their right to privacy are often violated.

Often prevented from working, from leaving the country or from moving freely within the country, these women are kept under strict surveillance. They are routinely arrested and interrogated about the activities of their exiled husbands, about their contacts with them, and about their sources of subsistence: They are often subjected to torture, including sexual abuse; some have been forced to divorce and others have been imprisoned for long periods, and their children have been traumatized by police raids conducted both during the day and at night.

In addition, anyone who gives them any help, however minimal, risks being prosecuted. Hundreds of people have been accused of “unauthorized collection of funds” and imprisoned just for having helped families of political prisoners and refugees.

“It is difficult to reconcile such practices with the Tunisian authorities’ discourse in favour of women’s rights,” Amnesty International said.

Samira Ben Salah, mother of four young girls and married to an exiled Islamist opponent, came under pressure after her husband fled the country in 1991. She was frequently arrested and in 1992 she was sentenced to six months' imprisonment. After her release from prison, arrests and interrogations continued; in detention she was undressed, tortured, sexually abused, threatened with rape and forced to file a divorce procedure. Her ordeal lasted until the end of 1996, when, after strong international pressure, she was able to leave Tunisia with her daughters to join her husband in Germany.

If the case of Samira Ben Salah and of some other women have been finally resolved and they have been able to obtain passports for themselves and their children, dozens of other women continue to suffer similar injustice. After years of ordeal and with no prospect of any solution in the near future, some women have chosen to take the risk of leaving the country with their children without travel documents. Some are now in a difficult situation in neighbouring countries and others have been arrested before they could cross the border.

Rachida Ben Salem was arrested on 18 May with her two small daughters as she was attempting to cross into Libya, from where she was hoping to be able to go to join her husband, a political refugee in Holland. She is now detained on charges of belonging to a criminal gang and risks a long prison sentence.

Amnesty International and other human rights organizations have continued to raise their concerns with the Tunisian authorities. However, detainees continue to be held in secret detention and tortured in the Ministry of the Interior itself. The scale and persistency of the violations, and the lack of action on the part of the authorities, show that such violations are tolerated or even encouraged at the highest level of the Tunisian Government.

“Complaints lodged by victims of such violations are usually ignored or, worse still, can result in further violations as a means of punishment,” Amnesty International said.

While welcoming the release of six prisoners of conscience in the past few months, and the recent release on bail of the trade unionists who were detained since last April, Amnesty International renews its call on the Tunisian authorities to take without delay concrete measures to put an end to the daily human rights violations.

The organization calls in particular for the release of all men and women prisoners of conscience, an end to the practice of torture, the setting up of independent and impartial investigations, and an end to intimidation and harassment.

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