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NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: EXTERNAL - SYRIA

NEWS INITIATIVES - INTERNAL

INTERNATIONAL NEWS RELEASES

Saudi Arabia - 14 September - SEE NEWS SERVICE 88

Sudan - 29 September - SEE NEWS SERVICE 88

TARGETED AND LIMITED NEWS RELEASES

Japan - 18 August - SEE NEWS SERVICE 97

Syria - 18 August - An embargoed News Service item is enclosed, which the IS will send to regional media

Angola - 20 August - SEE NEWS SERVICE 90

Yemen - 26 August - SEE NEWS SERVICE 95

North Korea - 1 October - SEE NEWS SERVICE 88

FORTHCOMING NEWS INITIATIVES

Myanmar - 8 October (International).

EJEs and "Disappearances" - 20 October (International)

Venezuela - 10 November (International, linked to EJEs & Disappearances)

AI INDEX: MDE 24/WU 02/93 EXTERNAL
EMBARGOED FOR 18 AUGUST 1993

SYRIA: LENGTHY SENTENCES FOR PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE AFTER UNFAIR TRIALS

Amnesty International has written to the Syrian Government protesting about lengthy prison sentences given after unfair trials to 34 political prisoners - many of whom are prisoners of conscience. They had already spent years in detention before the trials began.

The men were sentenced by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) to between three and 15 years for being supporters of the unauthorized Party for Communist Action (PCA) and have no right of appeal as this court's decisions are final. Among those sentenced are prisoners of conscience such as Malik al-As'ad and Rustum Ahmad Rustum, aged 39 and 40 respectively, who were given 15 years' imprisonment each. Both have been held in detention since 1982 - Amnesty International has been urging their unconditional release for many years.

The 34 were among more than 500 political detainees, including prisoners of conscience, whose trials before the SSSC began in July 1992 and most of them are still in progress. All face the same charges in connection with various unauthorized political parties such as the PCA, the Communist Party Political Bureau (CPPB), the Arab Socialist Democratic Ba'ath Party (ASDBP), the Arab Socialist Union Party in Syria (ASUPS), and the Nasserist Democratic Popular Organization (NDPO). Most of them were arrested in the 1980s and held without charge or trial until July 1992. They were held in indefinite detention under state of emergency legislation, in force for over 30 years, and had no access to legal assistance or the outside world. Many were allegedly tortured.

Amnesty International sent trial observers to some of the hearings and expressed its concerns about the trials to government officials. The organization called for the immediate and unconditional release of all the prisoners of conscience and expressed concern about gross violations of the right to fair trial for the other defendants. Such violations included lengthy periods of detention without trial - up to 12 years in some cases; defence lawyers having limited access to their defendants' files and even being denied the right to meet in private with their clients and to summon defence witnesses. The court failed to investigate torture allegations or order medical examinations and those sentenced had no right of appeal against their convictions and sentences.

Amnesty International is gravely concerned by the recent SSSC verdicts. The organization also fears that the other ongoing trials of the 500 or so defendants may be concluded with similar verdicts. Many of these defendants are also prisoners of conscience. They include Mufid Mi'mari and Usama 'Ashur al-'Askari, who have been charged respectively in connection with the CPPB and the PCA. They have been in detention since 1980 and 1982. Usama's sister, Doha 'Ashur al-'Askari, a 29-year-old former student, has also been referred to trial following her arrest in February this year. She had been in hiding since 1986 when the authorities began to seek her arrest in connection with the PCA.

Amnesty International has reiterated its appeal to the Government of Syria to release all prisoners of conscience immediately, and to give fair trials to all the other defendants in accordance with international standards for fair trial.