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Syria: Free key rights defenders

Government arbitrarily holds Darwish, colleagues despite UN demands

The government of Syria should immediately and unconditionally release the arbitrarily detained human rights defender Mazen Darwish and his colleagues Hani Al-Zitani and Hussein Ghareer, 61 human rights organizations said today. The United Nations Security Council demanded the release of all arbitrarily detained people in Syria on 22 February 2014.

Darwish and his colleagues, held in violation of international standards by government authorities for over two years, are in the Adra central prison in Damascus pending trial before the Anti-Terrorism Court.

On 10 March, the head of the Anti-Terrorism Court postponed the men's trial for the seventh consecutive time, to 24 March. The latest postponement was reportedly because a trial judge was sick but previous postponements were due to the government's failure to present evidence against the three men.

The trial has failed to comply with international fair trial standards, the organizations said. The detainees have not seen the evidence against them, and fear that evidence extracted under torture may be used against them. There have also been excessive delays.

Syrian Air Force Intelligence arrested the three men on 16 February 2012, in Damascus, when officers raided the offices of *the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)*, a key local nongovernmental organization working to disseminate information regarding the human rights situation in Syria. The government has brought terrorism charges against the three men for their work at SCM, and despite credible reports that security forces subjected them to torture while in detention, there has been no investigation into the abuses.

Their ongoing detention is a part of a wider campaign of threats and harassment against human rights defenders in Syria which appears intended to prevent them from carrying out their legitimate and peaceful human rights work, the organizations said.

Despite repeated calls by the international community, including the United Nations, for the release of the three human rights defenders, the authorities have refused to release them. A 15 May 2013 UN General Assembly resolution included a demand for their immediate release and on 14 January 2014, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found their detention to be arbitrary and called for their release.

The Syrian authorities should immediately carry out UN Security Council Resolution 2139 adopted on 22 February 2014, the organizations said. The resolution demands the immediate end of arbitrary detention, torture, kidnappings, abductions, and forced disappearances and the release of all arbitrarily detained persons. In so doing, the government should immediately and unconditionally release and drop all charges against Darwish, Ghareer, and Al-Zitani.

The UN Security Council and the international community, in particular countries supportive of the Syrian government, should press for the immediate and unconditional release of all those currently arbitrarily detained, the organizations said.

The 61 organizations are:

1. Albadeel for studies and research/ Jordan
2. Amnesty International
3. Ana Press
4. Arab Foundation for Development and Citizenship
5. Arab Working Group for Media Monitoring
6. Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)
7. Article 19
8. Asharq Center (Saudi Arabia)
9. Assyrian Human Rights Network
10. Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR)
11. Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS)
12. Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR)
13. Cairo Institute for Human rights Studies (CIHRS)
14. Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE)
15. Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria
16. Cham Center For Democratic and Human Rights Studies
17. CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
18. Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies (DCHRS)
19. Development for People and Nature Association (DPNA)
20. Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN)
21. Freedom Foundation (Yemen)
22. Front Line Defenders
23. Gathered Lawyers Kobani
24. Gulf Centre for Human rights (GCHR)
25. Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)
26. Human Rights Watch (HRW)
27. Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR)
28. International Center For Supporting Rights and Freedoms
29. International Media Support (IMS)
30. International Institute for Nonviolent Action
31. Iraqi Institution for Development
32. Iraqi Intuition for the Civil Development
33. Iraqi Journalists Rights Defense Association (IJRDA)
34. Iraqi Network for Social Media
35. Itana for Documentation
36. Jordanian Commission for Democratic Culture (JCDC)
37. Kurdish Organization for Human Rights and General Freedom in Syria (DAD)
38. L'Association Saharaouie des Victimes des Graves Violations des Droits de l'Hommes Commises par l'Etat Marocain (ASVDH)
39. Lawyers for Lawyers (L4L)
40. Maharat
41. Media International Support (IMS)
42. Monitor of Human Rights in Oman
43. Monitor of Human Rights on Saudi Arabia
44. My Right Syrian Organization for Woman And Children
45. Nooraldine Zaza Cutural Centre- Iraqi Kurdistan
46. Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
47. Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)
48. Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA)

49. PAX for Peace
50. PEN International
51. Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
52. Samir Kassir Foundation - SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom
53. Syrian Al Karama Media Center
54. Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research
55. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
56. Syrian Network for Human Rights
57. Syrian Observer
58. Syrian Women for Development
59. The Day After Association
60. Violation Documentation Center in Syria (VDC)
61. Yemen Organization for Defending Rights & Democratic Freedoms

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