

PUBLIC

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UA 140/08

Fear of torture/possible prisoner of conscience

SYRIA

Habib Saleh (m), aged 58

Habib Saleh was arrested on 7 May. It is not known where he is held, and he is in grave danger of torture.

Habib Saleh was arrested in Tartus, on Syria's western coast, by agents of one of Syria's many security forces. It is not known why he was arrested, but he has been repeatedly imprisoned for a total of some five years for publishing criticism of the government.

Habib Salih is the founder of the Tartus branch of an unauthorised discussion group, the National Dialogue Forum. Amnesty International took up his case as a prisoner of conscience in 2001, when he was arrested after he published articles on the internet under the heading "Letters to the Regional Conference of the Ba'ath Party", which accused the Syrian government of "corruption", "tyranny" and a lack of respect for human rights. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment by the Supreme State Security Court in Damascus, whose trial procedures are notoriously unfair, on charges including "inciting racial and sectarian strife." He was released in September 2004. (For details see UA 226/01, MDE 24/029/2001, 7 September 2001 and updates.)

He was arrested again on 29 May 2005 and sentenced in August that year by the military court in Homs to three years' imprisonment for "weakening nationalist sentiments" and "spreading false news". The charges related to articles critical of the Syrian authorities that he had published on the internet. He was released in September 2007. (For further details see UA 156/05, MDE 24/039/2005, 7 June 2005.)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Syria is a state party to the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, but torture is widespread in interrogation and detention centres in Syria. "Confessions" extracted under duress are systematically used as "evidence" in Syrian courts, and defendants' claims that they have been tortured are almost never investigated. According to Syrian human rights organizations, in 2007 at least three people died as a result of torture and ill-treatment in custody.

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

- expressing great concern that Habib Saleh is detained incommunicado at an unknown location;
- calling on the authorities to release Habib Saleh immediately unless he is to be charged with a recognizably criminal offence.
- calling on the authorities to guarantee that he will not be tortured or otherwise ill-treated, and reminding them that Syria is a state party to the UN Convention Against Torture;
- urging the authorities to reveal where Habib Saleh is held, and immediately allow him visits from his family, a lawyer of his choosing and any medical treatment he may require.

APPEALS TO:

President

His Excellency Bashar al-Assad

Presidential Palace

al-Rashid Street

Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic

Fax: + 963 11 332 3410

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Justice

His Excellency Muhammad al-Ghafari

Ministry of Justice

Al-Nasr Street, Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic

Fax: +963 11 666 2460

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Foreign Affairs

His Excellency Walid Mu'allim

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

al-Rashid Street

Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic

Fax: + 963 11 3327620

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 9 July 2008.