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Sudan: Clampdown on civil society

Amnesty International deplores the clampdown by the Sudanese government and security forces on members of Sudanese civil society solely for peacefully discussing issues related to the future of their country. This can only call into question the government's commitment to a peaceful future for all Sudanese.

While discussions continue in Kenya to bring an end to decades of civil war in Sudan, members of Sudanese civil society, human rights defenders and political activists are being forcibly denied the opportunity to discuss their own future. In the past few weeks the Sudanese government and security forces have forcibly interrupted meetings and arrested a number of people many of whom Amnesty International would consider to be prisoners of conscience. Conditions of detention are poor and detainees are routinely denied access to families, lawyers and medical aid. Amnesty International fears for the safety of all those peacefully expressing their opinions in relation to the peace talks.

The most recent of these cases is Ghazi Suleiman, a human rights activist who is being held in incommunicado detention at an unknown location following his arrest in the capital Khartoum. Ghazi Suleiman, who is Chair of the Sudan Human Rights Group and a leader of the political party National Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (NARD), was arrested from his home at 8am on 2 July by national security force officers. Under interrogation, Ghazi Suleiman was asked about his involvement in the "Khartoum Declaration", a joint statement drawn up by political activists and civil society representatives on the peace process and the status of the national capital of Sudan. A press conference at which the Declaration was due to be signed on 2 July was disrupted by national security force officers, although the location was moved and the Declaration signed. To date, his whereabouts remain unknown.

On 3 July, two of the Declaration's signatories, Mohammed Alhafiz, lawyer and Vice-Chair of the Sudan Human Rights Group, and Min-Allah Eissa, a Trade Union leader, were arrested and taken to the political section of the national security forces office in Khartoum. They have been told to report daily, from 5 July, to the offices of the National Security Forces. According to Amnesty International's information they will refuse to do so, and this may result in their re-arrest. This would place them at risk of torture or ill-treatment whilst in detention.

On 19 June at 8.45 pm, about 30 security officers armed with guns raided the house of Ghazi Suleiman and arrested at least 36 political activists and civil society representatives and confiscated some documents. They had gathered there to discuss the "Cairo Declaration" of 24 May, a joint statement of northern political opposition and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement expressing views about the peace process and the status of the national capital of Sudan in a future agreement. They were brought to the headquarters of the National Security Forces in Khartoum North, near

Farouk cemetery, and had to give officers their names, addresses and phone numbers. They were released after two hours. Ghazi Suleiman was interrogated until 1am, allegedly reported being treated roughly and asked to stop organising political gatherings and activities. He was then released.

On 2 June, the national security forces arrested 38 women from the Nuba Mountain Women's Association in Khartoum as they were travelling to a conference on peace and development to be held in Kauda, in the Nuba Mountains. They were detained over night and at least one woman had to continue reporting to police. Belongings were confiscated and the NGO organizing the meeting has been shut down by the authorities ever since.

Background

In July 2002, the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/ Army (SPLM/A) signed the "Machakos Protocol" in Kenya, which promised a future peace agreement and an end to the decades-long civil war in the country. It was signed under the auspices of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development, a regional grouping of governments, presided by General Sumbeiywo and international mediators from the United States, the United Kingdom and Norway. Both parties have since then signed a cease-fire and held sessions to resolve contentious issues. The latest round of talks in May 2003 has stalled on the status of the capital of Sudan in the final agreement as well as security and power-sharing issues.

Civil society and the political opposition are not included in the peace talks. While the SPLM claims to consult with the Southern civil society, which has had meetings and made propositions to feed into the process, the government of Sudan now appears to block initiatives from the Northern civil society to get involved in peace discussions.

Although the "Machakos Protocol" mentions that human rights should be guaranteed in the future peace agreement, so far peace talks have focussed on power-sharing, borders and security issues. Amnesty International has called on both parties to the conflict and the mediators to the peace talks to comprehensively address human rights issues in their discussions and to put the human rights of all Sudanese at the heart of any future agreement.

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