

EXTERNAL

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24/06/96

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MEDICAL CONCERN

*Death of a prisoner of conscience
Karim al-Haj Hussain*

SYRIA

Amnesty International is saddened to learn of the death of Karim al-Haj Hussain, a prisoner of conscience. He is believed to have died on 25 December 1995, aged 30, as a result of tuberculous meningitis.

*Karim al-Haj Hussain was arrested in August 1987 at the age of 21 in connection with membership of the Party for Communist Action (*Hizb al-'Amal al-Shuyu'i*). He was held for several years without charge or trial before finally being brought to trial before the Supreme State Security Court and sentenced on 27 February 1994 to eight years' imprisonment for links with the PCA. This court is not bound by any existing judicial procedural rules applicable in ordinary criminal cases and trial procedures fall far short of international standards.*

Background

A large number of PCA members and supporters were arrested between 1980 and 1991 following waves of repression directed against the party's activities. PCA literature has frequently highlighted and condemned government violations of

human rights and civil liberties. It has also regularly called for the lifting of the state of emergency in force since 1963 and for the restoration of democratic freedoms.

Karim al-Haj Hussain's eight year sentence expired at the end of August 1995 and he was transferred from Sadnaya prison to an intelligence-run detention centre in September. He had been suffering from tuberculosis for some time and reports note a worsening of his condition in the six months prior to his death. It is not known whether he received any treatment. In December 1995, one week before his death, he was admitted to hospital with meningitis. His admission is said to have taken place only after he had been on hunger strike for three days. He was returned to the detention centre from hospital as his case was beyond treatment, and from there was returned home on 24 December 1995 where he died the following day.

It is clear that the provision of medical attention in Syrian prisons is grossly inadequate and Amnesty International has documented several cases of Syrian prisoners of conscience having died very shortly after release or transfer to hospital.

Among such deaths are those of former Syrian President and Prime Minister, Dr Nour al-Din al-Atassi, who died in 1992 from cancer of the oesophagus just months after being released from 22 years' imprisonment without charge or trial. Imprisoned with him were a group of former government and Ba'ath party officials who were taken into custody after the current President, Hafez al-Assad, seized power in a bloodless coup in 1970. Following the death of the former President, another two of the remaining imprisoned ex-officials died: Muhammad Rabah al-Tawil, the former Minister of the Interior, died of active tuberculosis in 1993, eight months after his release, and Salah Jadid, a former chief of staff in the Syrian army, died in August of the same year while still imprisoned after almost 23 years of detention without charge or trial. The cause of death was given by the Syrian authorities as "septic shock, acute kidney failure and a sharp drop in blood pressure". Although Amnesty International appealed for further information, no explanation was ever given as to what led to septic shock nor the medical treatment he received.

Over the last several years there have been a series of large-scale amnesties benefiting thousands of prisoners. However, there still remain many prisoners of

conscience in Syria. Amnesty International is seriously concerned that prisoners arrested purely for peacefully-expressed political views are being held in long-term detention or imprisonment and deprived of access to proper medical care, sometimes needed as a result of their conditions of imprisonment.

Karim al-Haj Hussain

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To: Medical professionals

From: Medical Office / Middle East Regional Program

Date: 20 February 1996

MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION

*Death of Karim al-Haj Hussain
SYRIA*

Keywords

Theme: *Death in custody/POC/medical care*

Summary

Karim al-Haj Hussain was a prisoner of conscience arrested when he was 21 and who died of tuberculous meningitis in December 1995 after spending over eight years in prison. Please see the details attached.

Recommended Actions

Letters are requested from medical professionals to the addresses below:

- *expressing concern at the death of Karim al-Haj Hussain and asking for details of the medical care he received in prison - in particular how his tuberculosis was treated*

- *expressing concern that he was held in detention beyond the expiry of his sentence and asking why he was not released in August 1995 when his sentence expired*

- *expressing concern that he should have been detained solely for peacefully-expressed political opinions and urging that all remaining prisoners of conscience be unconditionally released.*

Addresses

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His Excellency
 Dr Muhammad Harba
 Minister of the Interior
 Ministry of the Interior
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His Excellency
 Husayn Hassun
 Minister of Justice
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 Al-Nasr Street

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COPIES TO:

*His Excellency
Dr Iyad al-Shatti
Minister of Health
Ministry of Health
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and Syrian diplomatic representatives in your own country.