

SYRIA : Amnesty International calls for release or fair retrial of all political detainees

Amnesty International is writing today urging Bashar al-Asad, the Syrian President-elect, and the new Syrian leadership to put human rights high on its agenda by releasing political prisoners in Syria, unless they are retried fairly, and instituting a program of judicial and legislative reform.

"Today, on the 20th anniversary of the massacre of hundreds of prisoners in Tadmur Prison, we call on the Syrian government to dedicate itself to building a state of law and human rights", Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization stressed that the resolution of the issue of political prisoners should be considered of first importance. Thousands of detainees have "disappeared", their whereabouts not known to their families or extrajudicially executed. At least 1,500 are believed to remain, most of them still detained in secret without access to families, in other prisons and detention centres.

"It is now time that Syria end this prison system of despair", said Amnesty International. "We are making an urgent call to the new Syrian Government to reexamine the case of every person detained for political or security offences and to release, after so many years, all those detained for their beliefs, all those who have been detained for years without trials and all others unless they are given a fair and public trial according to international standards with all rights to a defence".

The Syrian government has recently stated that no political prisoners are being held. Amnesty International has on many occasions given the government lists of political detainees and asked for clarifications.

"On our last visit in 1997 we handed over to the Syrian Government a list of 661 political detainees, a small proportion of the thousands of names of those detained or 'disappeared' in our files, and we were prepared to discuss each individual case with the Syrian Government. Unfortunately, they were not ready to discuss the lists," said Amnesty International. "We would be ready to come back at any time".

Background

The Tadmur massacre took place on 27 June 1980, a day after an attempted assassination of President Hafez al-Asad in Damascus. The following morning more than 100 members of the Saraya al-Difa' 'an al-Thawra (Brigades for the Defence of the Revolution, then under the command of the President's brother Rif'at al-Asad), and members of the 138th Security Brigade were flown by helicopters to Tadmur (also known as Palmyra, visited each year by thousands of tourists). Leaving some on standby and to guard the helicopters, 80 men, divided into units of 10, entered the prison to kill the prisoners in their cells and dormitories. The number killed is variously given as between 500 and 1000, mostly from the Muslim Brotherhood. The bodies were then buried in a mass grave outside the prison and, to cover up the massacre, it was said that they were executed.

The 1,500 political prisoners now said to be detained in Syria include about 800 prisoners held in Tadmur. They are mostly suspected supporters of the Muslim Brothers but include supporters of the pro-Iraqi wing of the Ba'th Party, a few communists and others.

Former detainees have described the prison regime in Tadmur as one of humiliation, hunger and constant torture.

"Death is a daily occurrence, lurking in torture, random beating up, the gouging of eyes, the breaking of limbs ... It stares one in the face and is staved off only by coincidences over 17 years" , wrote one prisoner of Tadmur, in a letter smuggled out of Syria this year.

Sednaya Prison, where conditions are better and visits are often allowed, contains about 560 political detainees including members of the pro-Iraqi wing of the Ba'th Party, Muslim Brothers, communists, Lebanese, Jordanians, Palestinians and Kurds. Other political detainees are held in al-Mezze Prison; they include Nizar Nayyuf, a Syrian journalist and human rights activist who has won many prizes, including a UNESCO freedom of the press award in May 2000.

At least 200 political detainees are believed to be held in other detention centres and in Duma Prison for women. All prisons contain hostages, detained for no other reason than to put pressure on family members active in the opposition to give themselves up. The wife of an opposition leader abroad, who was recently detained for one week in prison in Syria, described meeting one woman who had been detained for this reason for 20 years. Another woman "disappeared" in Syrian detention is Khadija Bukhari, a Lebanese singer, who was arrested by Syrian intelligence in Beirut Airport in 1992 and last seen the same year in a detention centre in Syria.

There have been improvements over the past five years. Thousands of detainees have been released in Presidential amnesties. Hundreds of long-term prisoners were released in 1998. Others were released this year, some up to three years after the expiry of their sentences. At the end of 1996 a new governor was appointed to Tadmur Prison and the harsh prison regime was somewhat relaxed. But prisoners are still detained in appalling conditions without trial or after grossly unfair trials and usually without access to their families and new political detentions still continue.

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