

PUBLIC

AI Index: MDE 24/028/2007

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Further Information on UA 142/06 (MDE 24/039/2006, 19 May 2006) and follow-ups (MDE 24/040/2006, 31 May 2006; MDE 24/051/2006, 24 July 2006; MDE 24/057/2006, 2 October 2006; MDE 24/065/2006, 25 October 2006; MDE 24/066/2006, 27 October 2006; MDE 24/072/2006, 21 December 2006) – Fear of torture/incommunicado detention/prisoners of conscience/unfair trial

SYRIA **Anwar al-Bunni (m), lawyer and human rights defender**
Michel Kilo (m), writer and former prisoner of conscience
Mahmoud 'Issa (m), former prisoner of conscience
Khalil Hussein (m), former prisoner of conscience
Suleyman Shummar (m)

Anwar al-Bunni was sentenced to five years' imprisonment on 24 April, after an unfair trial. He had been convicted of "spreading false information harmful to the state" on account of his human rights activities.

The announcement of the harsh sentence shocked those attending the court session, who included diplomatic representatives of a number of embassies. Anwar al-Bunni then gave a statement to the court, concluding, "I can only end by thanking everyone for their support, especially those who took the trouble to attend this political trial. I am very proud of their support for the issue of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience." He also instructed his lawyers not to appeal against the decision, saying that the trial was a political one.

The next court session for Michel Kilo and Mahmoud 'Issa is scheduled for 4 May. Khalil Hussein and Suleyman Shummar remain in hiding and continue to be tried in their absence.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

According to one of his lawyers, Anwar al-Bunni "entered the courtroom with his head held high, as is his custom, and greeted all those present in the court with his sunny smile... After the Chief Judge read out the verdict, all those present in the court were astounded by its harshness, which set out a prison sentence of five years on account of human rights activities in Syria. Anwar welcomed the unjust verdict with a sarcastic smile, and commented that this decision, along with the trial, was supremely political, and constituted a gross violation of freedom of opinion and speech, and an effort to terrorize and frighten the Syrian public, its politicians and activists."

The "spreading of false information" took place when Anwar al-Bunni raised the case of the death in custody of 26-year-old Muhammad Shafer Haysa, as a result of inhumane treatment, possibly amounting to torture. In April 2006, Muhammad Shafer Haysa's body was returned to his family, reportedly showing signs of torture, after several months' detention at an unknown location. During his trial Anwar al-Bunni reportedly asked the authorities to present any information they had indicating that Muhammad Shafer Haysa did not die as a result of ill-treatment, but received no response. According to Amnesty International's information, torture and other ill-treatment are still widespread in Syrian detention centres and there have been no independent investigations into any of the hundreds of cases of torture that have been reported over the years, including those that have reportedly resulted in death, as happened to Muhammad Shafer Haysa. Amnesty International has information on 14 such suspicious deaths since 2003, but has not been told whether any suspected torturer has ever been brought to justice.

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

- condemning the sentencing of Anwar al-Bunni to five years' imprisonment for his legitimate human rights work and calling for him to be released immediately and unconditionally, together with Michel Kilo and Mahmoud 'Issa;
- urging the authorities to implement measures laid out in the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which allow for "the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels";
- reminding the authorities that as a state party to the UN Convention against Torture they are obliged to investigate credible reports of torture and other ill-treatment, and asking what, if any, steps have been taken to investigate reports that Anwar al-Bunni was subjected to beatings and other cruel and inhumane treatment both by and in the presence of prison guards, and asking the authorities to ensure that Michel Kilo and Mahmoud 'Issa are not subjected to torture and other ill-treatment;
- asking what, if any, steps have been taken to investigate the death in custody of Muhammad Shaher Haysa, whose body was returned to his family in April 2006, reportedly showing signs of torture.

APPEALS TO: (Fax numbers may be difficult to get through to; please keep trying)

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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 13 June 2007.