

PUBLIC

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UA 333/07 Incommunicado detention/ fear of torture or ill-treatment/
possible prisoners of conscience

SYRIA
Dr. Feda'a al-Horani (f), aged 51, physician
Akram al-Bunni (m), aged 51, former prisoner of conscience, writer and political analyst
Ahmad To'meh (m), aged 51, dentist
Jabr al-Shoufi (m), aged 60, Arabic literature teacher
'Ali al-'Abdullah (m), aged 57, journalist

Peaceful advocates of political reform, Feda'a al-Horani, Akram al-Bunni, 'Ali al-'Abdullah, Ahmad To'meh and Jabr al-Shoufi have been held incommunicado without charge since their arrests between 9-17 December. Amnesty International believes that they are being held at State Security branches in the cities of Damascus, Deir al-Zour and al-Sweida, where they are at risk of torture and other ill-treatment. Amnesty International considers all of them to be probable prisoners of conscience, detained solely for their peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression and association.

All of those detained were among some 38 members of a leading pro-democracy grouping, the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (DDDNC), who were arrested after they took part in a meeting on 1 December 2007, in which Feda'a al-Horani was elected as the new president of the DDDNC. The DDDNC is an unauthorised umbrella grouping comprising opposition and pro-democracy groups in Syria. All but Feda'a al-Horani and 'Ali al-'Abdullah were arrested between 9-11 December. The other 33 DDDNC members were released within a few days and no charges are known to have been brought against any of them. However, Feda' al-Horani, Akram al-Bunni, Ahmad To'meh, Jabr al-Shoufi and 'Ali al-'Abdullah remain in detention for reasons that are currently unclear. The Syrian authorities have given no reasons for their continuing imprisonment and, reportedly, they do not have access to legal counsel or contact with their families, increasing concern that they could be subject to torture or other ill-treatment.

Dr. Feda'a al-Horani, who was arrested on 16 December, is a physician and an independent politician. She is the daughter of the now deceased politician Akram al-Horani who established the Arab Socialist party. Dr. Feda' al-Horani was diagnosed with abdominal cancer in 1996 and she still suffers from its effects.

Akram al-Bunni is a former prisoner of conscience. He was previously imprisoned for more than 17 years. Akram al-Bunni is also the brother of the human rights lawyer and prisoner of conscience Anwar al-Bunni who is currently serving a five-year prison term in 'Adra prison in Damascus on the charge of "spreading false information harmful to the state". Anwar al-Bunni was sentenced following an unfair trial that appeared to be politically driven before Military Damascus court for signing the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, a petition calling for the normalisation of relations between Syria and Lebanon.

'Ali al-'Abdullah, who was arrested on 17 December, is a former prisoner of conscience who was repeatedly imprisoned for his legitimate work in defence of human rights. In 2006 'Ali al-'Abdullah and his son Muhammad al-'Abdullah were detained for seven months on charges including "broadcasting abroad false or exaggerated news which would damage the reputation of the state". During 2005, 'Ali al-'Abdullah spent over five months in detention, again for peacefully expressing his opinion. Another of 'Ali al-'Abdullah's sons, 'Omar, is also a prisoner of conscience serving a five-year prison term in Sednaya prison for his involvement, along with six other men, in developing a youth discussion group and for publishing pro-democracy articles on the internet.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Torture is widespread in Syrian detention and investigation centres, particularly during periods of incommunicado detention. Over the years, Amnesty International has documented 38 types of torture and ill-treatment used in Syria. "Confessions" extracted under duress are systematically used as "evidence" in Syrian courts, and the defendants' claims that they have been tortured are almost never investigated. Since 2004 at least 12 people are reported to have died as a result of torture and ill-treatment in custody.

In his report delivered on 27 February 2003, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture stated that "Torture is most frequently practised during incommunicado detention. Incommunicado detention should be made illegal, and persons held incommunicado should be released without delay."

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

- expressing concern that all five (name them) were reportedly detained between 9-17 December 2007, and are now held at State Security Branches in Damascus, Deir al-Zour and al-Sweida respectively, all apparently on account of their peaceful exercise of their human rights;
- expressing concern that they are detained incommunicado and could be at risk of torture or other ill-treatment, and urging the authorities to ensure that the four men are safeguarded against such abuse;
- calling on the authorities to release them immediately and unconditionally if they are prisoners of conscience held solely for the peaceful expression of their opinions, or else brought to trial promptly and fairly on recognizably criminal charges, or released;
- reminding the authorities that the five must be given immediate access to a lawyer of their own choosing, their families and any medical treatment they may require.

APPEALS TO:

President

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Fax: +963 11 332 3410
Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Defence

His Excellency General Hassan Ali Turkmani
Ministry of Defence
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Fax: +963 11 223 7842
Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Justice

His Excellency Muhammad al-Ghafari
Ministry of Justice
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Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Foreign Affairs

His Excellency Walid Mu'allim
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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 28 January 2008.