

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

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Syria: Fourteen prisoners of conscience must be released

Amnesty International is calling on the Syrian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release 14 men detained solely for expressing their opinion in a peaceful manner, on the eve of their trial on December 20.

"These men were exercising the basic human right of freedom of expression when they were arrested," said Amnesty International. "Therefore, they are prisoners of conscience and thus should not stand trial in the first place."

The 14 men were arrested by the Syrian police on 23 August 2003 as they were heading for a lecture on "the state of emergency" imposed by the authorities in Syria since 1963. The men include Fateh Jamus and Safwan 'Akkash, both members of the Party for Communist Action and former prisoners of conscience who in 1983 were sentenced to 15 years in prison after grossly unfair trials. The other twelve are 'Abd al-Ghani Bakri, Hazim 'Ajaj al-Aghra'i, Muhammad Deeb Kor, 'Abd al-Jawwad al-Saleh, Hashem al-Hashem, Yassar Qaddur, Zaradesht Muhammad, Rashid Sha'ban, Fuad Bawadqji, Ghazi Mustafa, Najib Dedem and Samir 'Abd al-Karim Nashar. The 14 men were due to be tried on Monday, 8 December 2003, but the court was adjourned because one of the defendants had not been notified.

The men are charged with "affiliation to a secret organisation and carrying out acts that could incite factional conflict within the nation". Human rights groups in Syria have called the trial "another juncture in the continuing deterioration of human rights status in Syria, and another form of the increasing human rights abuses by the authorities".

"By detaining these men, the Syrian authorities are violating the international treaties and conventions to which Syria is a signatory, and that guarantee the protection of basic human rights," said Amnesty International.

Amnesty International also calls on the Syrian authorities to bring all legislation in line with the principles of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) that guarantees the right to freedom of conscience, expression, assembly and association and the right to exercise these freedoms without undue interference. Syria is a signatory to ICCPR.

Amnesty International is extremely concerned at the long duration of the State of Emergency and calls on the Syrian authorities to seriously consider alternative measures in line with common international standards and practices.

In addition, Amnesty International is gravely concerned at the extremely long duration of the state of emergency in Syria, which has remained in force since being declared in Syria on 8 March 1963. A state

of emergency is by definition a temporary legal response to an exceptional and grave threat to the nation. The organization is also concerned that the imposition of the state of emergency is not consistent with the requirements of human rights law, particularly Article 4 of the ICCPR. In April 2001, the Human Rights Committee, the body that monitors states' implementation of the ICCPR, expressed concern over the existence of the state of emergency legislation that "does not provide remedies against measures limiting citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms".

Public Document

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