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MEDICAL ACTION

Algeria: Fears for imprisoned doctor and human rights activist

Key words doctors/ill-health

On 29 September 2003, Algerian doctor and human rights activist, Salaheddine Sidhoum, 55, who had been living in hiding for nine years, presented himself to the public prosecutor in Algiers, apparently because of his wish to return to a normal life. He was immediately taken into custody and is now being held in Serkadji prison, Algiers.

On 4 October Salaheddine Sidhoum's lawyers requested that he be released on bail, given that he gave himself up voluntarily and is not intending to evade trial.

Salaheddine Sidhoum began a hunger strike on the same day to claim certain rights – such as to be able to receive books and newspapers – after most of his personal belongings were taken away, and to demand a fair trial. He was reported to have stopped drinking water or taking sugar on the following day. Although Salaheddine Sidhoum has not been refused medical treatment, his family has expressed fears that his health is not closely monitored in prison. According to reports by his son who visited him in prison he is unable to walk by himself and has started to lose consciousness for increasingly long periods of time. AI has no further details of this.

According to members of his family and lawyers who visited him in prison, Salaheddine Sidhoum is being held in a small cell with no mattress or windows. He sleeps on a blanket on the concrete floor and has reportedly not been able to wash or change his clothes since he was taken into custody.

AI is currently considering whether he is a prisoner of conscience. In the meantime, it is calling on the authorities to grant him a prompt and fair trial and to ensure his security and well-being.

Background

Salaheddine Sidhoum has been living in hiding since 14 December 1994. The fact that he had documented serious human rights violations committed by the security forces, state-armed militias and armed groups since 1992, such as killings, torture and "disappearances", had made him the target of threats from different sides. Earlier in 1994 the Groupe Islamique

Armé (GIA), Armed Islamic Group, was said to have blacklisted him, along with other intellectuals, and to have been planning his assassination. In November 1994, a friend was allegedly tortured by the security forces partly in order to extract a “confession” that Salaheddine Sidhoum was an Islamist supporter. Salaheddine Sidhoum went into hiding three days before a documentary was broadcast on French television in which he appeared denouncing cases of grave human rights violations committed by the authorities. On 18 December 1994, a day after the television broadcast, armed plainclothes men, believed to be security officers, came to his house asking about his whereabouts and intimidating his family.

In 1997, while still in hiding, Salaheddine Sidhoum was sentenced in absentia to 20 years’ imprisonment, accused of undermining the state, among other charges related to “acts of terrorism or subversion”. Like hundreds of others accused of such charges during the 1990s, the trial was grossly unfair. In accordance with Algerian law, since the previous verdict against him was reached in his absence, it will be quashed and he will face a retrial on the same charges.

Salaheddine Sidhoum continued to document human rights abuses in Algeria during his period in hiding, compiling testimonies and publishing them on the Internet. Several other Algerian activists, who had been active in research and campaigning work on human rights during the 1990s, today live in exile after receiving death threats against themselves or members of their family

Recommended Action

If you can, please send a fax to the Minister of Justice, in French, Arabic, English, or your own language:

- Stating that you are a health professional concerned with human rights;
- Expressing concern at the detention of Salaheddine Sidhoum, a doctor and human rights activist, being detained at Serkadji prison;
- Urging that he be granted immediate pre-trial release, given that he turned himself in voluntarily and has expressed his intention to stand trial;
- Expressing concern at reports of Salaheddine Sidhoum’s ill-health including that he is unable to walk by himself and has started to lose consciousness for periods of time and urging that the conditions under which he is being held be immediately improved in accordance with the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, including that he is given adequate medical care;
- Urging that Salaheddine Sidhoum receives a fair trial without undue delays.

Addresses:

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Ministère de la Justice
8 Place Bir Hakem
16030 El Biar
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fax: +213 21 921 243
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Copies

M. Mustapha Farouk Ksentini

Président

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Please send a copy of your letter to your professional association urging them to write on Dr Sidhom's behalf.

Monitoring of action

If you have access to e-mail you can help our attempt to monitor letter writing actions. If you write one, two or more letters please send us an e-mail and let us know. Please write in the subject line of your e-mail the index number of the action and the number of letters your write e.g. MDE oo/ooo/2003 – 3.

Please send your message to medical@amnesty.org

Thank you.