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Lebanon: Cease Harassment of Human Rights Activist for Documenting Torture

International and Local Groups Condemn Rise in Intimidation of Human Rights Defenders

The Lebanese authorities should immediately cease harassment of Saadeddine Shatila, of the international human rights group Alkarama, for his work documenting torture by security forces, a group of 8 international and local groups said at a news conference today.

The groups also criticized an emerging pattern of intimidation against human rights defenders who raise concerns about security agencies. They also called on the Lebanese judicial authorities to investigate the allegations of torture documented by Alkarama.

Lebanon's military intelligence summoned Shatila to their headquarters in Beirut at 8 a.m. on July 25, 2011. He was released at 8 p.m. after more than seven hours of continuous interrogation, which focused on his work documenting human rights violations in Lebanon, particularly cases of torture. Alkarama has submitted these cases to the United Nations human rights special procedures, particularly the special rapporteur on torture. On July 26, the military prosecutor, Saqr Saqr, interrogated Shatila again and referred him to a military investigative judge, Riad Abu Ghida. Shatila is accused of having "published information harmful to the reputation of the Lebanese Military."

"Instead of investigating a human rights activist, Lebanon's judiciary should be investigating the allegations of torture that human rights groups have consistently documented," said Michael Romig, human rights officer with Alkarama. "This is blatant intimidation against those who work to highlight abuses committed by Lebanese security forces."

The intimidation of Shatila follows the recent harassment and prosecution of other activists in Lebanon for their human rights work. On March 22, the general prosecutor, Sa'id Mirza, opened a criminal investigation against the Lebanese Center for Human Rights (known by its French initials, CLDH). The prosecutor opened the investigation after AMAL, a leading political party headed by speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, filed a criminal complaint against CLDH for alleging in a report published on February 10 that some detainees reported being tortured by members affiliated with AMAL.

During their questioning, the CLDH representatives asked for a copy of the complaint but were not provided with it. CLDH said that judicial sources later told them that the AMAL complaint was for "inciting sectarian conflicts between various Lebanese communities" (art. 317 of the Lebanese Penal Code). Investigative Judge Jean Fernaini of the Baabda district is investigating the case, and the next hearing is scheduled on October 11.

On October 9, 2010, an officer in Lebanon's military intelligence interrogated Ghassan Abdallah, the general director of the Palestinian Human Rights Organization (PHRO). The subject was the group's membership in the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) and a seminar the group had

organized in partnership with the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC) – a government appointed body – regarding the system of permits imposed by the army to access Nahr al-Bared refugee camp. The interrogation lasted three hours, and Abdallah was told that each time he intends to renew his access permit to the camp, he would need to visit military intelligence.

On November 27, military intelligence interrogated Hatem Meqdadi, the coordinator of PHRO's activities in Nahr al-Bared, and detained him until December 1 without filing any charges. Meqdadi said his interrogation focused mostly on PHRO's documentation of human rights violations, the meetings of the organization's general director and its relations with foreign embassies. During his detention at Qubbeh military base, military intelligence ill-treated Meqdadi by forcing him to undress completely, preventing him from sleeping, and providing him food only once.

During a visit to Nahr al-Bared camp on May 11, an army member told Abdallah to go to a local military intelligence office, where a military officer ordered him to leave the camp. PHRO wrote several times to the authorities in Lebanon inquiring about the legal justification for such treatment, but received no response. Due to the army's harassment, PHRO closed down its office in Nahr al-Bared.

“Lebanon often prides itself on its vibrant civil society but its security services seem intent on silencing many of its voices,” said Nadim Houry, director of the Beirut office at Human Rights Watch. “The Lebanese government should send a clear signal to its security services to stop intimidating human rights defenders.”

Torture and ill-treatment remain a serious problem in Lebanese prisons and other detention facilities. Local and international human rights groups have gathered accounts from numerous detainees who reported being beaten and tortured during interrogation in a number of detention facilities over the last five years, including those operated by the Defense Ministry and the Information Branch of the Internal Security Forces.

Article 401 of the Lebanese Penal Code provides criminal penalties for the use of violence to extract confessions, but the Lebanese judiciary rarely, if ever, prosecutes state agents alleged to have committed torture or other ill-treatment. Human rights groups are aware of only one conviction since 2004, of a police officer on charges related to beating a suspect during interrogation. The Interior Ministry has not made public the results of an investigation it commissioned in August 2008 into allegations of abuse inside Lebanese prisons.

States have a special obligation to protect human rights defenders against risks that they may face as a direct result of their work. In 1998, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which says that individuals and associations have the right “to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

The Declaration also provides that states shall have the duty to “take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of [human rights defenders] against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary actions” as a consequence of their legitimate effort to promote human rights.