

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL WEB FEATURE

Syrian lawyer jailed for five years

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A human rights lawyer has been jailed for five years in Syria, following an unfair trial that appeared to be politically driven and during which he was not given full access to his lawyers.

The Damascus Criminal Court sentenced Anwar al-Bunni on the charge of "spreading false information harmful to the state". He has consistently denied this charge, which is linked to his legitimate work in defence of human rights.

"This deals another blow to human rights and human rights activists in Syria who have been the target of an intimidation campaign by the authorities," said Malcolm Smart, director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme. "The Syrian authorities should show more commitment to human rights and should cease locking up peaceful critics and advocates of reform."

Anwar al-Bunni was arrested along with 10 other people for signing the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, a petition calling for the normalisation of relations between Syria and Lebanon. Since his arrest on 17 May 2006, he has been detained at 'Adra prison, near Damascus, where he has been subjected to beatings and degrading treatment. In addition, the Minister for Social Affairs and Labour has called for him to be stripped of his citizenship.

Anwar al-Bunni is head of the Damascus Centre for Legal Studies and of a European Union-funded human rights centre that was closed down by the authorities shortly after opening in March 2006.

For many years, he has taken up cases of prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners and spoken out on human rights issues in the country. As an apparent consequence of this work to promote and protect human rights, he has been subjected to various forms of harassment. These include being summoned to meetings with the security forces, facing disciplinary measures from the Damascus Bar Association, and being prevented from travel abroad.

Despite these challenges, Anwar al-Bunni has continued to champion human rights from behind bars, including sending a letter to President Bashar al-Assad last week, calling for him to set up an investigation into prison conditions. In the letter, he noted that the six thousand prisoners in 'Adra are routinely subjected to beatings, insults and terror, and prevented from leaving their cells, watching TV and listening to the radio.

Trials of possible political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Syria, whether before the Criminal, Military, State Security or Field Military Courts, invariably fall short of international standards for fair trials. They lack independence, are widely perceived to be influenced by the security forces and the executive, and defendants have restricted access to their lawyers.

Reports of torture and other forms of ill-treatment of detainees are almost never investigated by the courts, including when defendants claim that “confessions” they made were extracted under duress.

Amnesty International considers Anwar al-Bunni to be a prisoner of conscience who has been tried on a charge that is politically-motivated and was brought against him because of his activities to defend human rights in Syria.

Amnesty International has published a number of other documents on the persecution of the signatories to the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, please see:

Syria: Another wave of arrests of human rights defenders and civil society activists (Public Statement, 17 May 2006)

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde240382006>

Syria: Dismissal of state employees for expressing opinions violates international human rights (Public Statement, 21 June 2006)

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engMDE240252007>

Syria: Beatings of PoCs must end, officials who have perpetrated or facilitated abuses must be prosecuted (Public Statement, 15 February 2007)

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde240082007>