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Syria/Jordan/Canada/USA: Canadian inquiry underlines need for investigation into Maher Arar case in Syria and Jordan

Amnesty International welcomes the findings of the Canadian public inquiry into the role of Canadian officials in the deportation and detention of Maher Arar, published on 18 September.

Among other findings, the inquiry concluded that Maher Arar was tortured while detained for almost 12 months in Syria. In light of this, Amnesty International is repeating its call to the Syrian authorities urgently to establish their own independent investigation into the torture and other ill-treatment of Maher Arar in Syria. Over many years Amnesty International has repeatedly documented cases, including Maher Arar's, illustrating the widespread practise of torture in Syria and called for proper investigations. However, the organization has never received information to indicate that any of these cases, including some which reportedly led to deaths in custody, have been investigated or that any officials responsible for torture have been prosecuted.

Maher Arar was detained in Syria between 9 October 2002 and 5 October 2003. He was mostly held in incommunicado detention in inhumane conditions in a tiny, unlit basement cell at the Palestine Branch of Military Intelligence, Damascus, before being released without charge.

During his detention in Syria he was tortured, including by being beaten with a shredded thick black electrical cable. He was threatened that he would be tortured using the metal 'German' chair and 'the tyre' torture methods and with electric shocks. He heard other prisoners being tortured and screaming. Interrogators, who may have been working on information supplied by Canadian and US intelligence agencies, alleged that he was involved with al-Qa'ida. The findings of the public inquiry have indicated that much of that information was inaccurate and had been improperly shared by Canadian police with their US counterparts. The inquiry has concluded that after extensive investigations "there is nothing to indicate that Mr. Arar committed any offence or that his activities constitute a threat to the security of Canada."

Maher Arar, a 34-year-old Canadian telecommunications consultant of Syrian origin, was detained in the US on 26 September 2002 while changing flights on his journey from Tunisia back home to Canada. He was detained in the USA for 12 days and then, on 8 October 2002 was taken from his cell in the middle of the night and flown on a private plane via other US airports and Rome, Italy, to Jordan, where he was beaten and driven to Syria.

Amnesty International also repeats its call upon the Jordanian authorities to make public the names of all individuals who have been transferred into or out of Jordanian custody from or to US custody, or via the assistance of US or other intelligence and security services. The dates and locations of the individuals' detention in Jordan should be provided, as well as the legal basis for their detention.

Background

The Canadian Commission of Inquiry's findings vindicate Maher Arar and call for him to be compensated. It calls too for an "independent and credible" review to be carried out into the cases of three other Canadian nationals of Arab origin who were detained, interrogated and tortured in Syria in previous years with the possible complicity or involvement of Canadian and other foreign intelligence agencies: Ahmed Abou EI-Maati who was detained for 11 weeks after he arrived in Syria on 12 November 2001 (after which he was further transferred to Egypt, where he again experienced severe torture and remained in detention without charge or trial until 11 January 2004); 'Abdullah Almalki who was detained at the Palestine Branch in Damascus for 22 months from 3 May 2002 until 10 March 2004; and Muayyed Nureddin who was detained in Syria from 11 December 2003 to 13 January 2004. The inquiry's fact-finder, Professor Stephen Toope, who has served as the Chair of the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances, interviewed all of these men in the course of his fact-finding mandate and concluded that each of them provided credible testimony that they had been tortured in Syria.

Amnesty International continues to call on the US authorities to establish an independent commission of inquiry into all aspects of the USA's "war on terror" detention policies and practices, including rendition. The Canadian Commission of Inquiry's findings on Maher Arar's case, as well as President George W. Bush's recent confirmation that the USA's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has been operating a secret detention and interrogation programme outside the United States, have further highlighted the need for such an inquiry in the US. Amnesty International is also calling on the US government to identify all individuals who have been held in the CIA programme, and clarify their fate and whereabouts.

Amnesty International has actively taken up the cases of Maher Arar, Abdullah Almalki, Ahmed EI-Maati and Muayyed Nureddin, both while they were in detention in Syria and following their return to Canada. The organization pressed for the public inquiry into Maher Arar's case to be convened and, once it was, participated actively in the course of the inquiry as an intervenor. Amnesty International had urged the Commissioner to include a reference to the cases of the other detainees in his report and to recommend that a further process of independent review into those cases was necessary. Amnesty International calls on the Canadian government to now move to implement this and all other recommendations in the inquiry report.

Amnesty International campaign to stop torture and other ill-treatment in the 'war on terror':
www.amnesty.org/stoptorture