

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE**

AI Index: PRE 01/090/2009
06 March 2009

Tunisia: Authorities must lift travel ban on Mohamed Abbou

The Tunisian authorities must immediately lift the unwarranted travel ban on human rights defender and former prisoner of conscience, Mohamed Abbou, who has been denied permission to leave the country today, for the seventh time since his release from prison in July 2007, Amnesty International said. This is the second time this week as he had already been prevented from boarding a flight to the Netherlands to attend meetings with Amnesty International.

“Mohamed Abbou is being held hostage in his own country in what seems to be a concerted campaign by the authorities to punish him for his human rights work,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Amnesty International.

Mohamed Abbou, a prominent human rights defender and a lawyer, was on his way to London to participate in a conference organized by Amnesty International when he was informed by security officers at the airport passport control that he could not leave the country. He received no explanation and it was suggested that he should not try to travel outside the country again. International law guarantees freedom of movement, including the right to leave one's own country.

Since his release from prison in July 2007 after serving 28 months of his three and a half year sentence, Abbou has been repeatedly prevented from leaving Tunisia on various occasions, on account of the “conditional” nature of his release. Although he has been released early, his prison term would not have lasted beyond September 2008. Abbou was sentenced in April 2005 to three-and-a-half years' imprisonment for denouncing torture in Tunisia in an article he posted on the internet in 2004 and for allegedly assaulting another lawyer, in a grossly unfair trial attended by Amnesty International observers. Amnesty International considered him a prisoner of conscience solely detained for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression and has campaigned for his release.

“The case of Mohamed Abbou is symptomatic of many cases of human rights defenders in Tunisia who are subjected to frequent harassment and intimidation by the security apparatus,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui. “We urge the Tunisian government to desist from such arbitrary behaviour and lift the travel ban on Abbou and to allow him to travel abroad in pursuit of his human rights work.”