

**PUBLIC**

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To: Health professionals  
From: Medical office / Eastern Mediterranean Sub-regional Team  
Date: 7 August 2000

### ***MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION***

#### **Three sick prisoners SYRIA**

**Key words:** ill health, denial of medical care, prisoners of conscience

#### **Summary**

Amnesty International (AI) has recently received information about the deteriorating health of three men held in Tadmur prison in Syria. All three -- Nu'man 'Abdu, Jurays al-Talli and Ammar Rizq -- are regarded by AI as prisoners of conscience (POCs), held solely because of their non-violently expressed political views. They were all convicted after unfair trials in which they were prevented from mounting any effective defence. AI is urging that they receive whatever medical care is necessary and that they be promptly and unconditionally released.

#### **Recommended actions**

Please write polite letters in English, Arabic or your own language on professional headed note-paper:

- o expressing concern about the state of health of Nu'man 'Abdu, Jurays al-Talli and Ammar Rizq, all held in Tadmur Prison [letters to President al-Assad could make reference to his medical training and knowledge]
- o urging that they be medically examined to make a proper diagnosis and determination of their medical needs and that they be provided with all necessary medical care, by appropriate specialists if necessary
- o urging that they be allowed immediate and unrestricted access to their families
- o urging that, as their imprisonment is based solely on their political beliefs and not on any criminal activity, they should be immediately released
- o stating your belief that all prisoners in Syria should have access to adequate diet and medical care in conformity with the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners
- o inviting a response

If you receive no reply from the government or other recipients within two months of dispatch of your letter, please send a follow up letter seeking a response. Please check with the medical team if you are sending appeals after 7 October 2000, and send copies of any replies you do receive to the International Secretariat (att: medical team).

#### **Addresses**

His Excellency Dr Bashar al-Assad  
President

Presidential Palace  
Abu Rummaneh, Al-Rashid Street  
Damascus,  
Syrian Arab Republic  
Salutation: Your Excellency

His Excellency Dr. Muhammad Harba  
Minister of the Interior  
Ministry of the Interior  
Merjeh Circle  
Damascus  
Syrian Arab Republic  
Faxes: + 963 11 222 3428  
Salutation: Your Excellency

His Excellency Nasser Qaddour  
Minister of State for Foreign Affairs  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
Al-Rashid Street  
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**Copies**

to diplomatic representatives of Syria accredited to your country.

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**MEDICAL CONCERN**  
**Sick prisoners**  
**SYRIA**

Amnesty International (AI) has recently received information about the deteriorating health of three men held in Tadmur Prison in Syria. All three are regarded by AI as prisoners of conscience, held solely because of their non-violently expressed political views. They were all convicted after unfair trials in which they were prevented from mounting any effective defence. AI is urging that they receive whatever medical care is necessary and that they be promptly and unconditionally released.

**The cases**

The three prisoners are:

Nu'man 'Abdu, born in 1960, a journalist, arrested in 1992 and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment by the Syrian Supreme State Security Court. He is reported to be suffering from a chronic leg wound. (AI has no details of this or other medical problems presented by these prisoners.) His health is reported to have worsened recently and he is said to have contracted, in addition to the above, a disease which causes 'bone disintegration'. He is said to have been denied access to specialist medical care by the Syrian authorities.

Jurays al-Talli, born in 1941, married with five children, a retired teacher, arrested in 1992 or 1993 and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment. He suffers from diabetes and serious ear problems which are believed to have affected his hearing. Reports reaching AI suggest that his health deteriorated recently and he is said to be also suffering from a disease affecting the spinal column discs.

Ammar Rizq, born in 1963, single, a university student of engineering at the time of his arrest in 1990, reported to be suffering from coronary heart disease and severe arthritis of the upper and lower limbs.

All the above prisoners of conscience are serving sentences of up to 15 years' imprisonment in connection with their involvement in the Party for Communist Action (*Hizb al-'Amal al-Shuyu'i*) and their non-violent opposition to the Syrian Government. Jurays al-Talli and Nu'man 'Abdu were both transferred in July 1998 to Tadmur Prison, an underground prison in the Syrian desert known for its harsh conditions, apparently as a form of a punishment. Ammar Rizq is also held at Tadmur Prison.

**Background information**

Amnesty International has long-standing concerns about political prisoners in Syria. Since the early 1970s critics or opponents of the government under President Hafez al-Assad have been arbitrarily arrested and detained without trial or subjected to unfair trial and sentenced to long periods of imprisonment. Prison conditions are poor and access to health care is believed to be extremely limited. In particular, Tadmur prison is renowned for particularly harsh conditions. An account by prisoners in Tadmur at the end of 1999 gives some insight into conditions there. They report the majority of prisoners suffering from malnutrition and anaemia, with food being limited and served in dirty crockery. Each dormitory has a "health officer" though this is unlikely to be a doctor. When prisoners are seen, diagnosis is made by interview rather than by examination and only in extremely serious cases would a prisoner be taken to an outside hospital. Prisoners rely on the presence in the prison of fellow inmates who are doctors though they have virtually no resources to carry out diagnosis and treatment of sickness.

AI has worked for the release of large numbers of prisoners of conscience in Syria since the 1980s and large numbers of prisoners have been released under the terms of presidential pardons or amnesties over recent years. In July 1999, AI welcomed the release of prisoner of conscience Doha 'Ashur al-'Askari (see MDE 24/14/99) and one other POC following a general amnesty issued by President Hafez al-Assad to celebrate his new term in office. Hundreds of political prisoners, including supporters of the Party for Communist Action (PCA), the Moslem Brothers, the Kurdish Popular Union and other unauthorized political organisations, are reported to have been set free as a result of the amnesty.

On 17 July 2000 Dr Bashar al-Assad, assumed the presidency of Syria after confirmation by a national referendum. Dr al-Assad was a London-trained ophthalmologist until he was recalled to Syria to be groomed for the presidency after the death of his elder brother Basil in 1994. He has given hope that there might be positive developments in human rights observance in Syria and that remaining prisoners of concern to Amnesty International might be released. However, so far there has been only one amnesty of political prisoners with the release of at least 30 members of the Muslim Brothers at the end of July. This transitional period is a time when the new government may be at their most open to release political prisoners and to improve medical conditions for those held.