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### **Syria/Lebanon: Prisoners' release should be a step towards uncovering the whole truth**

*Amnesty International today welcomed the reported release of 54 political prisoners including 46 Lebanese, seven Palestinians and one Egyptian from Syrian prisons. Those released, including 10 apparently arrested in 1999 and 2000, were handed over to Lebanese authorities.*

*"This is a step forward in redressing human rights violations committed by the Syrian forces operating in Lebanon over two decades," Amnesty International said.*

*However, Amnesty International is concerned that the fate of scores of Lebanese believed to be detained or have "disappeared" in Syria remain unknown. Those include at least 20 soldiers and two priests who were apparently arrested or abducted by the Syrian forces during the conflict between Lebanese army battalions loyal to General Michel 'Aoun on 13 October 1990 and Syrian troops. For example:*

*\*Antoine Zakhour Zakhour, a soldier in the Lebanese army born in 1963, "disappeared" following his arrest by the Syrian forces in Beit Meri on 13 October 1990. His detention in Syria was confirmed to the family by the Lebanese Ministry of Defence on 22 October 1990.*

*\*Johnny Salim Nassif, a corporal in the Lebanese army born in 1974, "disappeared" following his arrest by the Syrian forces in Daher al-Wahesh on 13 October 1990. His detention in Syria was confirmed to his family one year after his "disappearance".*

Earlier this year the Commission of Inquiry for the Investigation of Disappearances during the war, established by the Lebanese Government in January, received information from 168 families who believed that their relatives were held in Syria mostly from the late 1970s and 1980s. Amnesty International believes that proper investigation has yet to be made in relation to this category of "disappearances" in order to establish whether there are grounds for the families' claim that they are in Syria, and to clarify their fate and whereabouts in all cases.

For over two decades countless families have been living with the misery of not knowing the fate and whereabouts of their relatives, with conflicting information, blackmail and manipulation adding to their agony as they seek any clue about their loved ones.

"Now that the Syrian and Lebanese authorities have decided to resolve this issue they should endeavour to clarify all individual cases and provide information to their agonised families," Amnesty International said. "This chapter will be properly closed only when the whole truth is known."

Amnesty International calls upon the Syrian and Lebanese governments to urgently undertake adequate measures aimed at addressing the unresolved cases of those whose families believe them to be detained in Syria.

"All such claims should be properly investigated by a competent and impartial body and the results of such an investigation should be made public," the human rights organization said.

Names of all those still held in Syria should be published along with details specifying the reasons for their detention and whether they have been tried and sentenced.

*"All those who claim that they have been wrongfully or arbitrarily detained in Syria should be allowed access to legal remedies in accordance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which both Syria and Lebanon are parties," Amnesty International concluded.*

### **Background**

*Lebanese and Palestinian political prisoners held in Syria include scores arrested or abducted by Syrian military forces operating in Lebanon and transferred to Syria outside any legal framework. Others were arrested or abducted by Lebanese or Palestinian militias during the war in Lebanon and handed over to the Syrian authorities. Yet another group was arrested in Syria without judicial warrants and detained without due legal process. All have been kept for years in arbitrary detention or subjected to secret and summary trials by military tribunals often under sweeping charges. Most were held in incommunicado detention with no access to the outside world; only a few were allowed to receive occasional visits from their families.*

*For many years both Lebanese and Syrian governments have completely avoided the issue of the Lebanese detainees in Syria. The families who believe their relatives are held in Syria were repeatedly confronted with denials or equivocal answers. Some were even intimidated to drop their search altogether. Amnesty International has repeatedly submitted lists of names of Lebanese and Palestinians believed to be detained or have "disappeared" in Syria to both Syrian and Lebanese Governments. No response was ever received. In 1998, about 121 Lebanese were released from Syrian prisons, but no clarification was given by the Syrian authorities about the fate and whereabouts of the remaining Lebanese detainees or justification for their continued detention.*

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