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## Syria: Hopes of human rights reform set back

Three years ago, the "Damascus Spring", a short-lived period of openness to public debate and calls for reform in Syria, was effectively crushed. Leading participants in the emerging civil society movement were arrested and imprisoned. Two of these civil society activists -- Kamal al-Labwani and Habib Saleh -- were released last week on completion of their three-year prison sentences, but six are now entering their fourth year in 'Adra Prison, 15 kilometres north-east of the Syrian capital.

Hopes that the country may now be ripe for human rights reform have been set back by the recent sentencing of a group of small-town activists to several years' imprisonment, which they are serving in Sednaya Prison, a short ride up the mountains from 'Adra.

The young men were imprisoned for -- of all things -- being involved with a loose network of volunteers cleaning the streets of their town; establishing a free library; showing occasional videos; encouraging people to stop smoking and stop bribery; and participating in silent protests against Israeli and US military activities. All books in the library and all videos that were shown were licensed, as were the materials they used in their anti-bribery campaign.

All in their 20s, the men are Haythem al-Hamwi, a medical doctor and university teaching assistant; Muhammed Shehada, an English language graduate who had been doing his military service; Yahya Sharabajee, an accountant; and Mu'atez Murad, a mechanical engineer.

They were arrested in May 2003 shortly after participating in a silent march in Darya, a town just to the south-west of Damascus, protesting against the US invasion of Iraq. They are the only people who remain in detention out of a total of 22 men arrested and detained in that month. Eleven were released in January 2004, followed by seven more on 1 April 2004, after secret trials before a Field Military Court (FMC).

These Darya activists were inspired by Syrian Islamic scholar, Jawdat Sa'id, whose teachings they attended. Jawdat Sa'id has promoted non-violence since the 1950s and endured periods of imprisonment as a result. For Haythem al-Hamwi, Muhammed Shehada, Yahya Sharabajee and Mu'atez Murad, having been sentenced for three to four years' imprisonment for "attempting to establish a religious organisation, involvement in unlicensed social activities and attending unlicensed religious and intellectual classes", there has been a similar lack of tolerance.

In addition to the imprisonment itself, the four men have been subjected to various forms of torture and ill-treatment. According to testimonies received by Amnesty International, they were threatened and insulted; had their fingers crushed; were beaten on their faces and legs; had cold water thrown over them or their blankets; were forced to stand for long periods during the night; were forced to hear loud screams and beatings of other detainees; were deprived of sleep for several days; were stripped naked in front of others; were prevented from praying and from growing a beard; were detained in packed, communal cells of about 5m by 5m with up to 40 other prisoners; and spent prolonged periods incommunicado in tiny, dark cells just 80cm by 180cm in size.

In the overcrowded communal cells, the men "would sleep on their sides so as not to take up a large space, packed tightly in rows, face to face." In the tiny cells, "it was so dark that sometimes you'd knock over the water or food because you couldn't see them." The conditions are extremely unhealthy, dehumanising and degrading. The men have been infested with lice and were allowed to take a cold shower only once or twice a month. Three

of the men have been allowed only one visit since May 2003, whilst Yahya Sharabajee has received no visits at all.

The trials of Haythem al-Hamwi, Muhammed Shehada, Yahya Sharabajee and Mu'atez Murad -- before secret FMCs that normally investigate offences committed during war time or military operations -- were grossly unfair. They were not allowed to have lawyers, were given scant opportunity to defend themselves and have no right of appeal. Amnesty International considers the men to be prisoners of conscience, held solely for the peaceful expression of their non-violent beliefs.

The imprisoned civil society activists from the "Damascus Spring" ended up down the mountain in 'Adra Prison after similarly unfair trials. Most of them were tried by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC). The UN Human Rights Committee, the body of experts that monitors implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), has stated that this court's procedures are incompatible with the provisions of the ICCPR, to which Syria is a state party.

One of the men, Professor 'Aref Dalilah, said that he was beaten and ill-treated while held in 'Adra and, when his lawyer presented a bloodstained handkerchief during a court hearing, the court's military chairperson ordered the lawyer out of the court and banned him indefinitely from practicing before the SSSC.

It is almost unheard of for allegations of torture and ill-treatment -- even those that appear to have been the causes of deaths in detention -- to be investigated in Syria. Already this year, Amnesty International has received information on the deaths in custody of eight Syrians, including five Syrian Kurds, and no investigation is known to have been carried out into any of them.

Of the 38 types of torture and ill-treatment that Amnesty International has documented over the years to have been used in Syria, it is believed that most of them continue to this day and indeed that new methods have been added.

However, some positive steps are being taken. One was President Bashar al-Assad issuing of a Decree in June stating the government's intention to ratify the United Nations Convention Against Torture. Also this year, several hundred long-term political prisoners and prisoners of conscience were released. However, hundreds remain in prison, including up to 200 Kurds arrested after the disturbances in the Kurdish-populated areas in March, and Haythem al-Hamwi, Muhammed Shehada, Yahya Sharabajee and Mu'atez Murad.

Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience in Syria, including the four non-violent activists from Darya, and the six of the "Damascus Spring".

**Take action on behalf of the four Darya activists:**

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE240562004?open&of=ENG-SYR>