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**Tunisia: Three international human rights groups join call for  
release of all prisoners of conscience**

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**ON 29 JUNE 2001**

*Joint Statement*

*Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Federation of Human Rights joined Tunisian human rights organizations today in calling on the government of Tunisia immediately and unconditionally to release all prisoners of conscience and end the routine harassment of former prisoners of conscience and critics of the authorities.*

*The three organizations said the move must cover all known or suspected government opponents or human rights activists who have been imprisoned, prosecuted or harassed simply for the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of opinion, expression or association.*

*The repression of government critics has intensified over the past two weeks with prominent figures being arrested, put on trial or arbitrarily banned from travel.*

*Most recently, Sihem Ben Sedrine, a journalist and spokesperson of the *Conseil national des libertés en Tunisie* (CNLT), National Council for Liberties in Tunisia, was arrested on 26 June after flying into Tunis and charged with defaming the judiciary and spreading false information, apparently because of her recent public criticism outside Tunisia of the*

deteriorating human rights situation. She has been jailed, awaiting trial on 5 July.

On 19 June 2001, Mohamed Mouadda, former prisoner of conscience and former leader of the *Mouvement des Démocrates socialistes* (MDS), Movement of Democratic Socialists, the main legal opposition party in Tunisia, was arrested and sent back to jail apparently because of his recent public calls for increased political freedoms. He had been conditionally released in December 1996 after spending over a year in prison on trumped-up charges of being a Libyan agent. He had been arrested on 9 October 1995, the very day he went public with a critical letter addressed to President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali complaining about the lack of genuine pluralism.

Moncef Marzouki, a doctor and leading member of the CNLT, also faces a period in jail. Since December 2000 he has had a one-year prison sentence hanging over his head after being convicted of belonging to an unauthorized association (namely the CNLT) and spreading false information in connection with statements he made on human rights and the need for government transparency. He is awaiting the outcome of an appellate court hearing which began on 23 June 2001 and continues on 7 July.

Up to 1,000 political prisoners, most of them prisoners of conscience, remain in prison in Tunisia. They are detained in conditions that amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Dozens have gone on hunger strike already this year to demand their release and to protest against torture and their conditions of detention, including lack of access to medical care. Mohamed M=seddi, a former Tunis Air pilot serving a 27-year sentence imposed in 1993 for belonging to a subversive movement, was on hunger strike in April and May 2001 to

appeal for urgent medical treatment for injuries sustained when he was tortured in pre-trial detention.

Hundreds of former prisoners of conscience are routinely prevented from working or resuming a normal life. They are required, often arbitrarily, to report to the police on a regular basis, ranging from several times a day to several times a week. One former prisoner of conscience, HJdi Bejaoui, began a hunger strike on 8 May in protest at the restrictive and discriminatory measures imposed on him by the authorities since his release. Denied a medical card and passport since he was released in September 1999, he has to pay for any medical treatment in Tunisia and cannot go abroad for treatment. He had been shot in the leg when police arrested him in 1991 and still has a bullet lodged in his knee.

The restrictions on former prisoners of conscience from taking up work, accessing medical care, moving freely inside Tunisia and travelling abroad are unacceptable and must be ended immediately, @ the three international human rights groups said.

Human rights activists are confronted by routine harassment by security forces, including having their telecommunication lines severed and passports confiscated. Those who manage to obtain their passports may still be prevented from leaving the country. Sadri Khiari, a leading member of the *Rassemblement pour une alternative internationale de d'veloppement* (RAID) and also a founding member of the CNLT, was told by the authorities on 19 June 2001 at Tunis-Carthage airport, where he had gone to take a flight to Paris, that he was barred from leaving the country because of two outstanding judicial cases against him. He had succeeded in having his passport returned to him on 16 June only after beginning a hunger strike two days earlier with three companions whose passports had also been confiscated by the authorities.

Tunisians who work or study abroad are often arrested when they return home and then imprisoned on charges of having had contacts with political opponents abroad. Lotfi Ferhati, a Tunisian living in France, was arrested in August 2000 when he arrived in Tunisia with his wife for a family visit. He was held in the Ministry of the Interior for 18 days, where he was reportedly tortured and forced to sign an unread statement admitting to links with an unauthorized Islamist group. He retracted the statement during his trial. No other evidence or testimony was presented to the court, yet on 31 January he was sentenced to seven years= imprisonment.

AWe call on the government of Tunisia to free all prisoners of conscience from prison or from regimes of harassment,@ the three organizations said. AAnything else would fall well short of its international obligations and even its own discourse with respect to basic human rights.@

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- Human Rights Watch: call Hanny Megally in New York, USA, on +1 212 216 1230 or visit its website at <http://www.hrw.org>

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