

PUBLIC

AI Index: MDE 30/022/2001

30 July 2001

Further information on 06/00 (MDE 30/01/2000, 11 January 2000) and follow-up (MDE 30/03/00, 10 February 2000; MDE 30/017/2001, 26 June 2001) - Fear for safety/Prisoner of conscience

TUNISIASihem Ben Sedrine (f), journalist, human rights defender

Prisoner of conscience Sihem Ben Sedrine appeared before the examining judge for questioning on 5 July. The courtroom could contain no more than 20 people and the judge refused to transfer the hearing to another, larger, court in which all of the approximately 200 lawyers could assist. The defence lawyers decided to leave the court in protest against this restriction of the right of defence. Sihem then exercised her right to silence during the hearing.

The judge refused to release Sihem on bail and ordered her to remain in custody pending further interrogation. Sihem was sent back to the Manouba women's prison where, in the last week, she has been reportedly subjected to humiliating treatment. On several occasions, she has been prevented from receiving books and newspapers and also from receiving mail.

No new date has yet been set for Sihem's questioning. Amnesty International remains concerned for her safety in custody.

A journalist and human rights defender, Sihem Ben Sedrine is spokesperson of the unauthorized *Conseil National pour les Libertés en Tunisie* (CNLT), National Council for Freedoms in Tunisia, and director of the on-line *Kalima* magazine. She was jailed on 26 June when she returned from a two-week tour of Europe where she had spoken openly about the decline of human rights and freedom of expression in Tunisia.

A summons for Sihem's arrest was issued after her appearance on the London-based Arab television station *Al Mustaqilla* on 17 June. Sihem Ben Sedrine is being prosecuted for broadcasting false news with an aim towards disturbing public order and personal defamation of the person of a Tunisian judge.

On 10 July, the UK section of Amnesty International awarded Sihem with their Special Award for Human Rights Journalism under Threat. Her husband, Omar Mestiri, and her daughter, Essia, attended the ceremony in London in her name. Many other human rights organization and political figures have protested against her arrest and demanded her release.

On 4 July, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on human rights defenders, Hina Jilani, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the freedom of expression, Abid Hussein, expressed their strong concern over the human rights situation in Tunisia, particularly after Sihem Ben Sedrine's arrest.

In Tunisia, a committee has been created to support Sihem and an Internet site has been set up to follow her case and to ask for her release (<http://sihembensedrine.multimania.com>)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Tunisia is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 19 of the ICCPR states: 1. Everyone shall have the

right to hold opinions without interference. 2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.

FURTHER RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Arabic, French or in your own language:

- expressing grave concern that Sihem is held in prison and urging that she be immediately and unconditionally released as a prisoner of conscience;
- seeking assurances that she will be treated humanely in custody, in accordance with international standards for the treatment of detainees;
- reminding the government of Tunisia of its commitments under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

APPEALS TO:

President

Président M. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali
Président de la République
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Salutation: Excellence

Interior Minister

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Justice Minister

M. Bechir Takkari
Ministre de la Justice
Ministère de la Justice
31 Boulevard Bab Benat
1006 Tunis
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Fax: + 216 1 568 106

Telegrams: Ministre de la Justice, Tunis, Tunisia

E-mail: mju@ministeres.tn

Salutation: Excellence

COPIES TO:

M. Slaheddine Maâoui
Bureau du Premier Ministre
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and to diplomatic representatives of Tunisia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 10 September 2001.