

PUBLIC

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Fear for safety

15 December 2000

TUNISIA

Human rights defenders

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Three people have been ill-treated by police and many others have been harassed and intimidated as part of a widespread crackdown on human rights activists in Tunisia.

On 15 December Omar Mestiri, Secretary General of the *Conseil National des Libertés en Tunisie* (CNLT), National Council for Liberties in Tunisia, was beaten by police, bundled in a car and left in the countryside about 50 km outside the capital. His two companions, Sihem Ben Sedrine and Mohamed Bechri, were also ill-treated. They had gone to the Ministry of Health to present a petition expressing concern at the harassment of CNLT President Moncef Marzouki, who was arbitrarily dismissed from his job as professor of medicine at Sousse University in July. He is due to be tried on 16 December for “maintaining an unauthorized association” (that is, the CNLT) and “spreading false information with the aim of disturbing public order” (that is, publically condemning human rights violations in Tunisia). The night before, Sihem Ben Sedrine’s car, which was parked near her home in the building where the CNLT offices are based, was broken into and a large knife was left on the back seat in what appears to be a threat.

The police, who are keeping the CNLT building under constant surveillance, also prevented a number of human rights activists from entering the building on 15 December, including human rights lawyer and CNLT member Nejib Hosni, who is due to be tried on 18 December. He is being prosecuted for having resumed practising his profession after being banned following his detention as a prisoner of conscience on trumped-up charges from 1994 to 1996. The ban was imposed by the authorities without the consultation of the *Conseil de l’Ordre des Avocats*, the Tunisian Bar Association, the only institution which may decide if a lawyer is to be suspended or disbarred.

## BACKGROUND

In recent weeks the Tunisian authorities have stepped up their campaign of harassment and intimidation against human rights defenders, and have deployed increased resources to curtail their activities.

From 8-10 December the police prevented a series of CNLT meetings and workshops, marking the second anniversary of the CNLT and Human Rights Day, from taking place. A large number of police officers blocked the access to meeting venues, and all the known participants were followed everywhere. Their homes were watched and they were prevented from going to cafes and restaurants, even in small groups.

On 27 November the authorities closed down Tunisia’s main human rights organisation, the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l’Homme* (LTDH), Tunisian Human Rights League, taking control of all its files on human rights violations and making it a criminal offence for anyone to carry on LTDH’s work. (See UA 365/00, MDE 30/27/00, 28 November 2000).

Following these events, the European Parliament passed an urgent resolution on 14 December expressing concern at the increased targeting of human rights defenders in Tunisia and calling for measures to be taken to redress the situation.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in French, English, Arabic or your own language:**

- expressing concern at the continued and increased attacks against human rights defenders and calling for their targeting, harassment and intimidation to cease immediately.

**APPEALS TO:**

Minister of the Interior

M. Abdallah KALLEL

Ministre de l'Intérieur

Ministère de l'Intérieur

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**Telegram:** **Ministre Interieur, Tunis, Tunisia**

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**E-mail:** **mint@ministeres.tn**

**Salutation:** **Monsieur le Ministre / Your Excellency**

Presidential Councillor for Human Rights

M. Dali JAZI

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**Salutation:** **Monsieur le Conseiller / Your Excellency**

**COPIES TO:**

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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 26 January 2001.