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Syrian activists held on spurious ‘terrorism’ charges face prolonged detention

The Syrian authorities must drop charges against five human rights activists whose "patently unfair" terror trial was today put on hold for another two months, said Amnesty International.

The five men from the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), all of whom have been allegedly tortured or otherwise ill-treated in custody, were due to appear at the Anti-Terrorism Court in Damascus today.

The trial has been postponed until 21 August, meaning the three activists still detained will remain in custody.

“This trial is patently unfair. The only ‘crime’ committed by these activists was to carry out their legitimate human rights work. The Syrian authorities must drop the spurious charges against them,” said Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

"The three activists who remain behind bars are prisoners of conscience - jailed for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression - and they must be released immediately."

All five men were arrested on 16 February 2012, when the SCM offices in Damascus were raided by uniformed men believed to be members of the Air Force Intelligence.

Three of the activists - Mazen Darwish, Hussein Gharir and Hani al-Zitani - have been held ever since. The other two men, Mansour al-Omari and Abd al-Rahman Hamada, were released conditionally in February 2013.

They are facing trial on the vague charge of “publicizing terrorist acts”.

The indictment against them refers to activities such as monitoring online news by the Syrian opposition, publishing studies on the human rights situation in Syria and documenting the names of people detained or killed in the conflict.

All face a jail sentence of up to 15 years if convicted.

“Instead of persecuting these men, the Syrian authorities should turn their attention to investigating their allegations of torture in custody and bringing anyone responsible to justice,” said Philip Luther.

"The accusations relating to the publishing of news and studies clearly violate the right to freedom of opinion and expression."

Amnesty International has learned that Hani al-Zitani, Mansour al-Omari and Abd al-Rahman Hamada

were beaten with whips, sticks and electric shock rods during their mealtimes every day for a period of three months, while being held in military custody.

It understands that Mazen Darwish and Hussein Gharir were also tortured or otherwise ill-treated.

The wife of Mazen Darwish, who founded the SCM, told Amnesty International she fears for her husband's health after his treatment in detention.

"Mazen was prevented from seeing daylight for nearly 10 months and he did not receive any nutrition, besides the torture he suffered," said Yara Bader.

"I noticed some torture marks on his hands and feet, but he did not speak to me in a lot of detail. He does not complain, and always tries to be calm with me, but I'm very concerned."

As far as Amnesty International is aware, the Syrian authorities have not investigated the torture allegations.

"We are concerned that these men are being brought to trial based in part on statements extracted under torture or other ill-treatment in custody," said Philip Luther.

"They have spent months detained in inhumane conditions. Now they are set to be tried in an Anti-Terrorism Court whose proceedings fall far below international standards for fair trial."