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Syria: Tal al-Mallohi sentenced after flawed trial

Amnesty International today expressed serious concerns about the trial of Tal al-Mallohi, a 19-year-old Syrian woman, who was sentenced earlier this week by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) to five years in prison.

Tal al-Mallohi was sentenced on 14 February 2011 after being convicted of disclosing secret information to a foreign country, namely the USA, under Article 273 of the Syrian Penal Code. Amnesty International understands that the SSSC found that she had received a sum of money from the US embassy in the Egyptian capital, Cairo, where she was living, in exchange for passing it the names of Syrian security officers.

Tal al-Mallohi was arrested on 27 December 2009 and was held incommunicado for nine months before her transfer to Douma women's prison near Damascus, where she was allowed, on 30 September 2010, her first of only two family visits. On 10 November 2010, she was brought before the SSSC's investigating judge and charged.

Her trial consisted of three hearings that were closed to the general public. During this period, she was only allowed to see her mother once and her lawyer three times, all of them in the presence of security guards inside the courtroom. Reportedly, Tal al-Mallohi confessed to the offence with which she was charged, though Amnesty International does not know whether or not she was subjected to duress to force her to do so.

Tal al-Mallohi has a blog on which she has published poems and articles that she has written on various political and social issues. Amnesty International understands, however, that neither the content of her blog nor any aspect of her writings or political views, previously believed to have been among the reasons for her arrest, was raised during the trial.

In a statement issued two days ahead of the verdict, the US government "strongly" condemned the trial, called "for her immediate release" and rejected "as baseless allegations of American connections that have resulted in a spurious accusation of espionage".

A newspaper believed to be close to the Syrian authorities reported on 17 February that, according to an official from the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the US diplomat to whom Tal al-Mallohi allegedly passed the names of Syrian security officers was involved in an alleged assassination attempt against a Syrian diplomat in Cairo and that Tal al-Mallohi had unsuccessfully attempted to recruit the latter to collaborate with the US authorities. However, according to information received by Amnesty International, these accusations were not even raised by the prosecution in her trial.

Amnesty International publicly expressed concerns about the case of Tal al-Mallohi last year. In an Urgent Action issued on 17 September 2010 (www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/025/2010/en), it expressed concern that she had been held incommunicado at a State Security branch in Damascus since her arrest in December 2009 and was consequently at risk of torture or other ill-treatment. Amnesty International also feared that she might be a prisoner of conscience detained solely for the

peaceful exercise of her right to freedom of expression, a concern which stemmed in part from her family's belief that her detention may have been related to the content of her blog. The authorities had not revealed the reasons for her arrest at the time.

Amnesty International does not currently believe that Tal al-Mallohi is being detained as a result of her writings on political and social issues in Syria. It is, however, seriously concerned about the nature of the trial, a number of aspects of which appear to grossly violate international fair standards. These include her subjection to prolonged periods of incommunicado detention, her limited access to legal counsel and the nature of the SSSC, the court which convicted her. Trials before the SSSC generally fall far short of international fair trial standards. For more information about Amnesty International's analysis of the SSSC please see its *Memorandum on the Supreme State Security Court: A Summary of Amnesty International's concerns* (www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/039/2007/en).

Amnesty International reiterates its call for the SSSC to be fundamentally reformed or abolished.

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