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Tunisia: Amnesty International welcomes releases of political prisoners

Amnesty International welcomes the recent release of more than 80 political prisoners in Tunisia but remains concerned that some 200 other political prisoners, including possible prisoners of conscience, continue to be held serving sentences imposed after unfair trials.

In all, some 81 political prisoners were among 1600 prisoners released by the Tunisian authorities during the weekend of 25-26 February 2006, to mark the country's forthcoming 50th anniversary of independence. They included 75 prisoners who had been imprisoned for more than 10 years because of their membership of *Ennahda*, an Islamist organization that is banned in Tunisia. Most of the *Ennahda* prisoners were arrested, tortured and sentenced to long prison terms after unfair trials in 1992. While serving their sentences, many were subjected to harsh prison conditions, including prolonged solitary confinement and ill-treatment as an additional punishment. Several of those who were sentenced to life imprisonment still remain in detention.

One of those released was Hamadi Jebali, an *Ennahda* leader and former editor of the Islamist publication *al-Fajr* (Dawn), who was sentenced to 16 years' imprisonment after an unfair trial before the military court of Bouchoucha in 1992. He spent many years of his imprisonment in solitary confinement and was on many occasions denied medical attention and dietary needs while in prison. Visits were also often denied without reasons being given to the family.

Six members of the so-called Zarzis group were also released. Abdelghaffar Guiza, Omar Chlendi, Hamza Mahroug, Ridha Ben Hajj Ibrahim, Omar Rached, and Aymen Mcharek, all originally from the town of Zarzis in the south of Tunisia, were arrested in February 2003 and imprisoned on terrorism-related charges in April 2004 after an unfair trial before a Criminal Court in Tunis. The main evidence against them was confession statements that they alleged were extracted from them under torture while they were held incommunicado in pre-trial detention. The court failed to investigate their allegations, however, and convicted and sentenced them to 19 year prison terms. These were later reduced on appeal to 13 years. Amnesty International had called for their release or fair re-trial.

While welcoming the releases of political prisoners, Amnesty International is concerned that the releases are conditional. If those freed violate the conditions of their release, they could risk being re-arrested to serve the remainder of their sentence following a simple decision of the Minister of Justice and without any judicial process. They could also be put under house arrest or placement in a public or private institution, or both, for the remainder of their sentence.

Amnesty International remains concerned about some 200 political prisoners who continue to be held serving sentences imposed after grossly unfair trials. They include prisoners of conscience such as lawyer

and human rights defender, Mohammed Abbou, who is currently serving a three-year prison term largely for criticizing the Tunisian government in an article he published on the internet in 2004.