

AI Index: PRE 01/375/2009
30 October 2009

Tunisia: Assaults on journalists must be punished

The assault of two independent journalists in Tunisia and the arrest of a third in the wake of last week's elections must be punished, Amnesty International said today. "It appears that these three journalists were targeted because they have criticized the government and opposed the re-election, for a fifth term, of President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Director for the Middle East and North Africa Programme. "This is an extremely worrying development, indicating that there is likely to be no let-up in the Tunisian government's repression of dissent." Slim Boukhdhir, an independent journalist who has previously been jailed for writing articles critical of the government, was stopped in the street and forced into a car last Wednesday evening by five men in plain clothes, all believed to be police or security officials. They forced him to close his eyes, beat and insulted him as they drove away, then stopped the car, threw him out and kicked and punched him until he lost consciousness. Before he did so, one of the assailants brandished a knife and threatened to stab him. He was stripped of his clothes and his mobile phone, identity documents, money and house keys were taken, apparently to give the impression that he was the victim of an ordinary criminal mugging, and he was dumped in Belvédère Park in north Tunis. A passer-by helped him to get a taxi and a friend then took him to hospital where he learnt that he had sustained a broken nose and damage to his left eye, in addition to multiple bruising to his face and chest pain. Two hours before his abduction and assault, Slim Boukhdhir had given an interview to the BBC in which he criticized the lack of press freedom in Tunisia. On Thursday, another journalist and well-known government critic, Taoufik Ben Brik was arrested when he went to a police station in response to a summons he had received in connection with an alleged assault on a woman near his daughter's school on 22 October. He appeared before an investigating judge in the absence of his lawyers and charged with "assault, breaching public morality and damage to property" according to an official statement. He is currently being detained in Mornaguia Prison and is due to stand trial on 19 November. Before the election, he wrote several articles criticizing President Ben Ali's government. Later on Thursday, Lotfi Hajji, local correspondent for the Al Jazeera satellite TV channel, was subjected to a sustained verbal assault when he arrived at Tunis Carthage Airport after returning on a flight from Qatar. His unknown assailant, who is suspected of being a member of the security forces or someone acting on their behalf, shouted and insulted him in a highly intimidating manner, accusing him of opposing the government. In his reporting for Al Jazeera, Lotfi Hajji, had criticized aspects of the recent presidential and legislative elections. The targeting of these journalists, all known critics of the Ben Ali's government, reflects a wider and long standing pattern in which critics of the government, and human rights activists, are routinely subjected to oppressive police surveillance, threats and intimidation by security officials or people in plain clothes believed to be acting on their behalf. "It is high time that the Tunisian government put its house in order and lived up to its obligations under international human rights law," said Malcolm Smart. "The government portrays itself internationally as one committed to human rights and good governance but this, sadly, is far from the truth. In practice, the government is intolerant of criticism and allows its security forces and strong arm men to assault and intimidate critics with impunity."