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Syria: Kurdish minority rights activists jailed

Amnesty International condemns the prison terms imposed yesterday on three members of Syria's Kurdish minority convicted of "weakening national sentiment" and "inciting sectarian or racial strife or provoking conflict" on account of their legitimate exercise of freedom of expression and association.

Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

Yesterday, the Damascus Criminal Court imposed three year prison sentences on Sa'dun Sheikhu, Mohammad Sa'id 'Omar and Mustafa Jum'ah, all leading members of the Azadi (Freedom) Party, which advocates an end to discrimination against the Kurdish minority. The three were convicted of "weakening nationalist sentiment" and "inciting sectarian or racial strife or provoking conflict between sects and various members of the nation." They denied the charges, which are based on vaguely worded provisions of the Syrian Penal Code that have often been used to penalize Kurdish minority activists and human rights defenders. The charges arise from their circulation of an Azadi party newspaper which criticized continuing discrimination against Kurds, who are estimated to number between one and a half and two million and to comprise around 10 per cent of Syria's population.

Two other charges brought against the three men - that they had established an "organization with the aim of changing the financial or social status of the state" and committed "aggression aiming to incite civil war and sectarian fighting and incitement to kill" - were dropped.

Sa'dun Sheikhu and Mohammad Sa'id 'Omar were detained by Military Intelligence officers on 25 October 2008 and held incommunicado for more than three months. They were initially held in the north-western city of Aleppo, about 500km from their homes, before being transferred to the Military Intelligence's Palestine Branch detention centre in Damascus, where many detainees have been interrogated and tortured.. Mustafa Jum'ah was arrested on 10 January 2009 and detained incommunicado at the Palestine Branch for almost a month. The three men were transferred to 'Adra Prison in February and appeared before Damascus Criminal Court for the first time in June.

All three are currently held at 'Adra Prison although Mohammad Sa'id 'Omar was hospitalized after he suffered a stroke on 24 April, and is now reported to be partially paralysed and to have difficulty speaking and moving. Guards chained him to his bed while he remained in hospital. He is now receiving medication which his family provides when they make weekly visits to him in prison.

Before their trial, the three men were allowed only restricted access to their lawyers, who they were not able to consult under conditions of full confidentiality, and it was only with difficulty and after a significant delay that their defence lawyers were able to obtain copies of key prosecution documents.

The sentencing of these men yesterday follows the imprisonment of another leading Kurdish minority activist earlier this year. On 11 May, the Damascus Criminal Court sentenced Mesh'al al-Tammo, spokesperson of the Kurdish Future Current, an unauthorized political party, to three and a half years' imprisonment for possessing party documents critical of the Syrian government. He was arrested in August 2008. He too is a prisoner of conscience.

For more information, please see:

- Amnesty International's UA (Index: MDE 24/036/2008), issued on 11 December 2008;
- Amnesty International's UA update (Index: MDE 24/005/2009), issued on 23 February 2009;
- Amnesty International's UA (Index: MDE 24/001/2009), issued on 30 January 2009;
- Amnesty International's UA update (Index: MDE 24/004/2009) issued on 20 February 2009;
- Medical actions (Index: MDE 24/018/2009) issued on 14 July 2009.