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Public Statement

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Syria: Syrian human rights defenders under attack

Amnesty International is greatly concerned at the continuing harassment of human rights defenders in Syria. In the latest incident, Anwar al-Bunni, a lawyer and human rights activist, was attacked on 20 October in Damascus by three men on motorbikes who stopped him as he was travelling in his car. They dragged him from his car and assaulted him physically, leaving him bruised, and then sped off. In light of other harassment to which he has been exposed, it seems likely that this latest assault may have been ordered or carried out by state officials.

Earlier this month, security officials sought to detain Anwar al-Bunni on assault charges arising from an altercation that he had with a woman at the Palace of Justice in Damascus when he told her he was unwilling to represent her legally because the case was outside his expertise. Anwar al-Bunni has denied the assault claim, saying the accusations have been “fabricated”. However the case against him appears to have been referred to a criminal court.

Anwar al-Bunni has come under increasing pressure from the Syrian authorities because of his work as a lawyer and human rights defender, including his recent criticism of a government decision to dismiss 81 judges. He has also sought to sue the official in charge of ‘Adra Prison on behalf of one of his clients, former parliamentarian Mamun al-Humsi, who continues to be denied visits from his lawyer or family. Amnesty International considers Mamun al-Humsi to be a prisoner of conscience and calls for his immediate, unconditional release [see AI medical action: *Syria - Health concern: six imprisoned human rights defenders*, MDE 24/054/2005, July 2005].

In July 2005, Syrian authorities prevented Anwar al-Bunni from travelling to Geneva, Switzerland, to attend the UN Human Rights Committee when it considered the Syrian government’s latest report on its implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). He was turned back by officials when he arrived at Damascus airport on 14 July and told that State Security had issued Decision 251 banning him from travel, but he was given no reasons or explanation for this decision.

Amnesty International is concerned too about the harassment of another lawyer and human rights defender, Haytham al-Maleh. A long-time member of the unauthorised non-governmental organisation, Human Rights Association of Syria (HRAS), he is currently facing charges including defaming the President under Articles 374 and 378 of the Syrian Penal Code, which carry sentences respectively of up to two years’ and one years’ imprisonment. The charges also include insulting the military under Article 123 of the Military Penal Code, which carries a sentence of up to three years’ imprisonment. Although a civilian, he was brought before the Military Court on 18 October, when the trial was adjourned until 7 November in order, apparently, to allow him to see the dossier setting out the grounds for the charges against him.

Haytham al-Maleh's office is apparently under constant surveillance by Syrian security forces who are "advising" his clients to go elsewhere. He continues to be denied permission to travel abroad by the authorities. [See AI appeal case, *Syria Unable to Move: Freedom of Movement restricted for Human Rights Defenders (and Others)*, MDE 24/062/2005, August 2005]. He was previously referred to the Military Court in July 2003, but the charges against him were dropped as a result of a Presidential amnesty.

Human rights defenders in Syria are subject to frequent harassment and abuses by state officials, including unfair trials before special courts, by being placed under constant surveillance and being questioned about their activities, smear campaigns in the official media which depict them as "traitors" and "collaborators" with foreign powers, arbitrary detention, and, in some cases, torture.

Amnesty International continues to call on the Syrian government to fulfil its obligations to guarantee freedom of expression and association for all residents of Syria and to cease immediately harassment and persecution of human rights defenders. It is also calling, in particular, for the dropping of trumped-up charges against Haytham al-Maleh and Anwar al-Bunni, for an immediate investigation into yesterday's attack on Anwar al-Bunni, and for the lifting of official restrictions on their and other human rights defenders' freedom to travel abroad.

Background

In its concluding observations, the UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), in July 2005, expressed concern over many areas of human rights violations in Syria including: the continuing state of emergency legislation, in existence now for 43 years; the continuing practise of torture against detainees; the use of the death penalty that is not consistent with the ICCPR; the extensive limitations on the right to freedom of opinion and expression and on the right to peaceful assembly; discrimination and violence against women; and the targeting of human rights defenders.

The HRC called on the government to immediately release all persons detained because of their activities in the field of human rights and end all harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders. [For more information on violations against Syrian human rights defenders see for example, Amnesty International public statements: *Syria: End crackdown on human rights defenders*, MDE 24/034/2005, May 2005; *Syria: Release 'Ali al-'Abdullah and end arrests and harassment of human rights defenders in Syria*, MDE 24/028/2005, May 2005; *Syria: Release and drop all charges against Muhammad Ra'dun and end pattern of harassment and arrests of human rights defenders*, MDE 24/029/2005, May 2005; *Syria: Amnesty International concerned at arrests of members of the Committee of the Families of Prisoners of Opinion and Conscience*, MDE 24/055/2005, July 2005; *Syria: Drop all charges against Hasan Zeino, Yassin al-Hamwi and Muhammad 'Ali al-'Abdullah*, MDE 24/078/2005, September 2005].