

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Tunisia: Amnesty International Tunisia prevented from holding a meeting

Amnesty International has protested to the Tunisian authorities over an incident last Wednesday, when security officials prevented Amnesty International Tunisia from holding a small private meeting to discuss the organization's report launched that same day: *Challenging Repression: Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa* (Index MDE 01/001/2009). By their action, the Tunisian authorities have exemplified the pattern of harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders documented in the report.

In a letter sent to the Tunisian Minister of Interior and Local Development, Rafik Belhaj Kacem, Amnesty International sought an explanation for the action taken by the security officials and called for an end to such practices. The organization also urged the Tunisian authorities to comply with the principles of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, as well as to give close attention to the recommendations contained in the said report.

According to the information received, members of Amnesty International Tunisia planned to hold a small private round table discussion in their office in Tunis on 11 March. Members of other well-known Tunisian human rights organizations, including several journalists active in the promotion of human rights in Tunisia, were invited to participate. Security officials in civilian clothes physically blocked the entrance of the building, barring access to those invited. They provided no explanation for their action or on what legal grounds they had decided to prevent the meeting from taking place. Four days later, on 15 March, the office of Amnesty International Tunisia was subjected to heavy police surveillance and security officers have prevented several of its members from attending a national council meeting which takes place biannually.

The organization described the action of the Tunisian authorities as part of a much wider pattern of arrest, harassment, threatening surveillance and other repressive action by security officials towards those within civil society who are working to promote human rights in Tunisia. This includes refusing in practice to allow the legal registration of certain organizations exposing the poor human rights record of Tunisia and extends to the prevention of meetings, such as that which Amnesty International Tunisia members intended to hold earlier this week, effectively breaching their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Most recently, on 14 March, police prevented journalist and Deputy Director of the Bizerte office of the Tunisian League for Human Rights, Lotfi Hajji, and lawyer and human rights defender, Mohamed Abbou, from leaving Bizerte and Tunis, respectively, to participate in a meeting organized by the Association for the Advancement of Students in Chebba, Mehdia Governorate. They were both stopped by police when they were on their way to Chebba and forced to return home. Lotfi Hajji was expected to give a presentation on the role of the media in promoting human rights and Mohamed Abbou, on media freedom and public interest. Earlier this month, on 6 March, Mohamed Abbou was prevented from travelling abroad for the seventh time since his release from prison in July 2007.