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Tunisia: The authorities must put an end to widespread human rights violations

On the occasion of the opening of the Mediterranean Games in Tunis on 2 September, Amnesty International is keen to reiterate its concerns about grave human rights violations in Tunisia, the host country.

"Around 1,000 political prisoners, mostly prisoners of conscience, languish in Tunisian prisons where they suffer cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. The repression is directed at the full range of the political opposition, and human rights defenders are the main target of the Tunisian government authorities. On the occasion of this sporting event, this sad reality must not be forgotten," said the organization.

The journalist Sihem Ben Sedrine, spokesperson of the Conseil National des Libertés en Tunisie (CNLT), National Council for Freedoms in Tunisia, was arrested on 26 June on her return to Tunis. Freed on 11 August following a vigorous solidarity campaign, she can be brought to appear before the courts at any time for defamation, following remarks she made on 17 June concerning the independence of the judiciary, on Al Mustakillah, a private television channel based in London.

According to witnesses, less than a week after her release Sihem Ben Sedrine, her family and numerous human rights defenders were attacked by plain-clothes police officers while they were on their way to a reception to celebrate her recent release. In Tunisia, all those engaged in the defence of human rights suffer daily harassment, even in their private life.

Political opponents are still subjected to repression from the authorities, as demonstrated by the rearrest of Mohamed Mouadda, former leader of the Mouvement des Démocrates socialistes (MDS), Movement of Democratic Socialists, an opposition party. Sentenced in February 1996 to eleven years imprisonment after an unfair trial, principally on charges of threatening the external security of the state and exchange of intelligence with agents of a foreign power, he was, in December 1996, granted a conditional release. On 19 June 2001, he was rearrested and imprisoned, seemingly as a result of public appeals he had recently made for greater political freedoms. Mohamed Mouadda, who is a prisoner of conscience, now has to serve the rest of the sentence to which he was condemned in 1996, amounting to over nine years in prison.

Detention conditions in Tunisian prisons are also cause for great concern. Since the beginning of the year dozens of prisoners have gone on hunger strike to protest against their detention conditions. The case of Abdellatif Bouhajila illustrates a widespread phenomenon. Charged, along with others, with being a member of an Islamist group aiming at undermining the security of the state, he was sentenced, on 24 November 2000, to 17 years in prison, in a trial which was unfair to say the least. On 15 May 2001 he began a hunger strike in Borj Erroumi Prison in Bizerte to protest at his poor detention conditions. Although he is an asthmatic, he was placed in an overcrowded cell where the majority of the prisoners are smokers. He also suffers from a kidney disease which is aggravated by his having to sleep on the floor. After a period in hospital he is again on hunger strike. On 25 August several prisoners in Sfax Prison started a hunger strike, joined on 28 August by prisoners in Haouareb Prison in Kairouan. These

prisoners are protesting against the poor detention conditions and ill treatment to which political prisoners are particularly subjected.

Prisoners of conscience and political prisoners, once released, continue to be persecuted. Many former prisoners suffer daily harassment in the form of "administrative control". Some are rearrested and then released without charge. By a discriminatory policy several former prisoners, including torture victims, are not entitled to the health benefits enjoyed by all other Tunisians.

"The Tunisian authorities make considerable efforts to convey an image of Tunisia as a country which protects and promotes human rights. The authorities=rhetoric on human rights is not enough. Tunisia must urgently make this rhetoric a reality", Amnesty International stated.

Amnesty International urges the Tunisian authorities to:

- release immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience;
- ensure that impartial investigations are carried out into all cases of torture and that those responsible are brought to justice;
- ensure that trials conform to international standards;
- put an end to the daily harassment suffered by human rights defenders, former prisoners of conscience and government opponents.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>