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Tunisia: Amnesty International delegates prevented from meeting leading Tunisian human rights group

Amnesty International delegates were forcibly prevented from meeting members of the Tunisian human rights group Conseil national pour les libertés en Tunisie (CNLT), National Council for Liberties in Tunisia at its office in Tunis today. They were stopped from entering by some 15 to 20 Tunisian security officers wearing plain clothes, who were stationed in front of the building and keeping it under surveillance in an open and intimidating manner. The officers gave no reason for denying Amnesty International's representatives access but made it plain that they would not let them enter the building.

This is the latest in a number of incidents in which Tunisian security personnel have prevented delegates, civil society activists and journalists attending the UN-sponsored World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) from going about their legitimate activities. As the Summit, which Tunisia is hosting, opened on 16 November, three UN human rights experts publicly expressed "profound concern" about restrictions on freedom of expression and association in the country and appealed to Tunisia's President to take immediate steps to respect these fundamental freedoms.

Amnesty International's delegates sought to meet Sihem Bensedrine, spokesperson of the CNLT, and other members of the organization to find out more about the harassment and restrictions to which they have been subjected by the Tunisian authorities. Delegates of other human rights organizations at the WSIS seeking to hold meetings with the CNLT had also reported being barred from the building. Though widely respected as a human rights organisation, the CNLT has been consistently denied legal registration by the Tunisian government since its creation in 1998, with the result that, today, its very existence is uncertain. Public meetings or other activities intended to promote respect for human rights in Tunisia are subject to an array of limitations and frequently prevented by force.

Although barred from entering the CNLT's offices, Amnesty International's delegates were able to make contact with Sihem Bensedrine and establish that she and her colleagues were not being detained although the authorities are preventing access to the building and keeping it under heavy surveillance.

