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SYRIA: CAMPAIGN TO RELEASE 12 PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS ON TRIAL

Amnesty International is today launching a campaign for the immediate and unconditional release of 12 pro-democracy activists currently on trial in Syria. The organization considers all 12 to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for calling for democratic reform and respect for human rights, and is urging the Syrian authorities to drop all charges against them.

The activists were arrested after participating in a meeting in December 2007 of a broad-based opposition coalition, the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (DDDNC). Tens of other participants were also arrested but later released without charge.

The 12 activists are being tried before the Damascus Criminal Court on vaguely worded charges frequently used against advocates of reform, including "weakening national sentiment". A verdict is expected on 29 October. If found guilty, they could face up to 15 years in prison.

Trial proceedings so far have been marked by serious irregularities. The 12 activists were initially held incommunicado for up to several weeks, during which time most have said that they were beaten and coerced into signing false "confessions". Their claims have not been investigated. Their access to lawyers has been restricted, while the lawyers themselves have been denied copies of the case file.

The DDDNC has called on the Syrian government to suspend the state of emergency in force since 1963, to release all political prisoners, to allow the safe return of Syrian exiles, to abolish a law which makes membership of the Muslim Brotherhood punishable by death and to uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

For more information, please see: Amnesty International, *Repressing dissent: Pro-democracy activists on trial in Syria* (Index: MDE 24/024/2008), <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/024/2008/en>.