

PUBLIC

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20 August 2007

UA 214/07 Fear of torture and other ill-treatment/incommunicado detention/possible prisoner of conscience

SYRIA **Ma'rouf Mulla Ahmed (m), aged 53, leading member of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (or Yeketi Party)**

Kurdish activist Ma'rouf Mulla Ahmed was reportedly arrested on 12 August at a Syrian checkpoint on the country's border with Lebanon. He is now believed to be detained incommunicado at Branch 285 of State Security (*Amn al-Dawla*), in the capital, Damascus, and is at grave risk of torture and other ill-treatment. Amnesty International believes that he may be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for his peaceful political activities.

According to Amnesty International's sources, Ma'rouf Mulla Ahmed, who owns a cloth shop in the north-eastern town of Qamishli, was arrested while travelling by bus to Lebanon, to visit friends. He was asked to leave the bus at a Syrian checkpoint controlled by State Security (*Amn al-Dawla*) at the Syrian –Lebanese borders.

Ma'rouf Mulla Ahmed is a leading member of the unauthorised Syrian Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (also known as the Yeketi Party), and was the Party's secretary in 2006. The activities of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Unity Party include calling for improved rights for Syria's Kurds, many of whom are denied citizenship and other basic rights. The party is known to be critical of the Syrian regime and its policies, and has spoken of the need to allow Kurds a greater political voice. On 10 December 2006, Kurdish activists reportedly held a peaceful protest in the north-eastern town of Qamishli, in support of Kurdish rights, including the right to Syrian nationality. Police reportedly beat protesters with sticks, injuring some 25 people, one of whom suffered a broken nose and head injuries.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Kurds in Syria suffer severe discrimination because of their ethnicity. They make up almost 10% of the population, numbering between 1.5 and two million, but an estimated 200,000 to 360,000 are not recognised as citizens. Kurdish is not recognised as an official language and its use in schools is apparently banned. It is reportedly forbidden to use the language at private celebrations and in the workplace. There are unconfirmed reports that by the summer of 2002 the authorities had raised the maximum sentence for printing in Kurdish, as well as for teaching the language, to five years' imprisonment. Kurds celebrating traditional festivals, such as Nowruz, the lunar New Year, which takes place in March are subject to arbitrary arrest.

Many Kurds are denied the full provision of education, employment, health care and other rights enjoyed by Syrian nationals. Kurdish human rights defenders and civil society activists who raise such issues or undertake other peaceful activities are particularly at risk of arrest and imprisonment on charges which, to Amnesty International's knowledge, are mostly used against Kurds, including "attempting to sever part of the Syrian territory and annex it to a foreign state". Such charges can lead to unfair trials before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) or military courts, whose practices fall far below international standards for fair trial.

Torture is widespread in Syrian detention and investigation centres, particularly during pre-trial, incommunicado detention. Over the years, Amnesty International has documented 38 types of torture and ill-treatment used against detainees in Syria. "Confessions" extracted under duress are systematically used as "evidence" in Syrian courts, and the defendants' claims of torture are almost never investigated. In 2004, of

at least nine people who died reportedly as a result of torture and ill-treatment while in custody, five were Kurds. On 30 May 2005, Sheikh Muhammad Ma'shuq al-Khiznawi, an Islamic religious leader and outspoken figure within the Kurdish community, died 20 days after he "disappeared", apparently in the custody of Military Intelligence agents. When the body was released by the authorities to his family, his body apparently showed signs of torture (See UA 131/05, MDE 24/027/2005). In 2007, according to reports received by Amnesty International, at least three individuals have died as a result of torture and ill-treatment in custody in Syria.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English, Arabic, French or your own language:

- expressing concern that Ma'rouf Mulla Ahmed, who is reportedly held at State Security Branch 285 in Damascus, has been held in incommunicado detention since his arrest on 12 August 2007 and is at risk of torture and ill-treatment;
- expressing concern that Ma'rouf Mulla Ahmed is a possible prisoner of conscience, arrested solely for the peaceful expression of his opinions;
- urging the authorities to ensure that Ma'rouf Mulla Ahmed is not tortured otherwise ill-treated;
- urging the authorities to allow Ma'rouf Mulla Ahmed visits from his family, immediate access to a lawyer of his choosing, and any medical treatment he may require;
- calling on them to release Ma'rouf Mulla Ahmed immediately and unconditionally unless he is charged with a recognizable criminal offence and given a fair and prompt trial.

APPEALS TO:

President

His Excellency Bashar al-Assad
Presidential Palace
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Fax: +963 11 332 3410

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Foreign Affairs

His Excellency Walid Mu'allim
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Salutation: Your Excellency

Ministry of Interior

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Salutation: Your Excellency

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Syria accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 1 October 2007.