

PUBLIC

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Medical Concern

SYRIA

Riad Seif (m), aged 61, former prisoner of conscience and former independent Member of Parliament

The Syrian authorities have refused to allow former prisoner of conscience Riad Seif to leave the country for medical treatment. He has prostate cancer, which has advanced to a stage where it is liable to start spreading to other parts of his body without specialist treatment, which is only available outside Syria.

Riad Seif applied for permission to travel overseas on 6 June, shortly after medical tests confirmed that he had advanced prostate cancer. The authorities did not respond until 13 August, when they informed him in person that his request had been refused. This apparently deliberate delay is putting his life in danger.

This is the second time that Riad Seif has sought permission to leave Syria for medical treatment and been turned down. In 2006, he applied to travel abroad for open heart surgery, but was refused.

Amnesty International considers Riad Seif's travel prohibition a form of punishment based solely on his non-violent exercise of his right to freedom of expression.

Riad Seif is a former independent member of the Syrian People's Assembly (parliament). He was detained on 6 September 2001, the day after he had held a political seminar at his house in Sahnaya, in the outskirts of Damascus, as part of the activities of a civil society organisation which he had set up, the National Dialogue Forum. Reportedly, between 400 and 500 people attended that seminar, at which a guest speaker, Professor Burhan Ghaliun, called for political reform and democratic elections. Riad Seif spent the next four years and four months as a prisoner of conscience.

He was released on 18 January 2006, but since then has been subjected to various forms of harassment and ill-treatment. One month after his release he was detained and kept blindfolded for five hours, reportedly to make him promise not to meet local and international journalists and diplomats. On 12 March 2007 Riad Seif was detained for one day for taking part in a protest organised by Kurdish parties and organisations. On 13 July he was badly beaten on his way out of the Internal Security branch, where he had to report every day. He later saw the men who had attacked him in the Internal Security branch building.

Nonetheless, Riad Seif continued to champion democratic reform. In an article titled *My experience in the People's Assembly*, published in the newspaper *As Safir* on 18 April 2007 before the Syrian parliamentary elections, Riad Seif described the role of parliament as "restricted to the formalities or adding a cosmetic touch to the whole process that would make the regime appear in a democratic guise to the Syrian public and the world especially in the presence of the 1973 constitution which gives the president the right to issue legislation whenever he wants."

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Human rights defenders and former political prisoners and prisoners of conscience have been targeted in Syria by a pattern of restrictions of freedom of movement (see *Appeal Case-Syria: Unable to Move: Freedom of Movement restricted for Human Rights Defenders (and others)*, MDE 24/073/2005, 12 August 2005: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE240732005?open&of=ENG-SYR>).

The so-called "Damascus Spring" period followed the death of President Hafiz al-Assad in June 2000 and the election of his son, Bashar al-Assad, to succeed him. During this period, the government began to allow a certain amount of freedom of expression, which led to the establishment of a number of forums where public affairs, political reforms and cultural issues were discussed. These "pro-democracy movements" tried to work for political reform, effective participation by the public in decision-making processes and freedom of expression and association in Syria. However, in February 2001, the Syrian authorities started to clamp down on these discussion forums and civil society groups, saying they had violated the government's guidelines. Some, like Riad Seif's National Dialogue Forum, continued their activities in defiance of the restrictions, and this appears to have been part of the reason for a wave of arrests in August and September 2001.

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

- calling on the authorities to approve Riad Seif's application for a travel permit immediately.
- reminding the authorities that refusing to allow Riad Seif to travel abroad for medical treatment is a serious violation of his right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, as set out in Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Syria is a state party;
- reminding the Syrian authorities that denying Riad Seif's access to medical treatment abroad is a serious violation of his right to freedom of movement as granted under Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

APPEALS TO:

President

His Excellency Bashar al-Assad
Presidential Palace
al-Rashid Street
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
Fax: +963 11 332 3410
Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Foreign Affairs

His Excellency Walid Mu'allim
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Health

His Excellency Dr Maher al-Husami
Minister of Health
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Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
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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 15 October 2007.