

Algeria: Hassiba Boumerdesi (f) and Amine Sidhoum (m)

Concern: Harassment, intimidation and false charges

Hassiba Boumerdesi (f), who is married with three children, aged 15 to 25, and Amine Sidhoum (m) are both human rights lawyers. They currently face trumped-up charges which may lead to them being suspended from practising law and several years in jail. Hassiba Boumerdesi and Amine Sidhoum have documented and opposed torture and unfair trials of people accused of terrorism and have worked with organisations of families of the 'disappeared'. In August 2006, under different laws governing the organisation and security of prisons, they were accused of having introduced prohibited items into prison without authorisation by the prison authorities. The case rests on allegations made by the prison director, apparently under pressure from senior authorities.

Hassiba Boumerdesi is accused of giving a detainee the minutes of a court hearing pertaining to his case. She has stated that her client is entitled to this document and that she obtained authorisation from prison personnel before passing it on. Amine Sidhoum has been accused of passing on several of his business cards to a detained client. Amine Sidhoum confirms that he passed on his business cards to the detainee, but does not consider that he committed an offence in doing so. Amnesty International is concerned that the lawyers are being prosecuted for activities which they carried out legally and in the interest of assisting their clients. By seeking to criminalise the passing of legal documents and contact details, the authorities are also preventing the lawyers from offering their clients an effective defence.

Amine Sidhoum also faces defamation charges. In an interview with a journalist in May 2004 he criticised the fact that one of his clients had been detained for two and a half years without trial. Due to quotes attributed to him following this interview, he was charged in September 2006 with bringing the judiciary into disrepute. Amnesty International believes the court cases have been brought against Hassiba Boumerdesi and Amine Sidhoum to intimidate them and discourage them from carrying out their human rights work, possibly with a view to banning them from working as lawyers. According to a law regulating the legal profession, the authorities may request that lawyers who are under investigation for a criminal offence are suspended from practising law. This could have significant wider impact as few lawyers in Algeria are prepared to take on human rights cases, due to fear of harassment.

Please write to the authorities:

- Expressing deep concern at reports that two human rights lawyers, Hassiba Boumerdesi and Amine Sidhoum, face charges that appear to be politically motivated and intended to stop them carrying out their important and legitimate work.
- Calling on them to immediately drop all charges against Hassiba Boumerdesi and Amine Sidhoum and allow them to continue with their work without fear of further reprisals
- Calling for current laws that violate freedom of expression and allow the prosecution of human rights defenders for their legitimate work, to be repealed or amended such as the 'Decree Implementing the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation' which includes a provision which threatens the right of victims and their families, human rights defenders, journalists, and any other Algerians to document, protest or comment critically on the conduct of the state security forces during the years of the internal conflict, must be reviewed and amended or repealed.

Please send appeals to:

M. Tayeb Belaiz
Ministère de la Justice,
8 Place Bir Hakem,
16030 El Biar,
Alger,
Algérie