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Two years behind Tunisian bars for speaking out

1 March 2007 marks the second anniversary of the imprisonment of lawyer and human rights defender Mohammed Abbou, prompting Amnesty International once again to call for his immediate and unconditional release. The organization considers him a prisoner of conscience, who continues to be detained solely for the peaceful expression of his opinion after he published articles denouncing torture in Tunisia and criticizing the Tunisian authorities.

On 28 November 2005, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that Mohammed Abbou's detention was arbitrary and in violation of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It called upon the Tunisian government to remedy the situation and ensure that the treatment of Mohammed Abbou was consistent with international standards.

In spite of this, Mohammed Abbou remains detained in El-Kef, 200km from his home in Tunis where his family resides. His lawyers have reportedly been denied permission on several occasions to visit him in prison and his wife has been physically assaulted or otherwise intimidated during a number of her visits.

Background Information:

Mohammed Abbou's article comparing torture in Tunisia to that in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison was published on a website on 26 August 2004. It is believed that his arrest may also have been connected to a more recent article in which he criticized a Tunisian government invitation to then- Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to attend the UN World Summit on Information Society which took place in Tunis in November 2005. On 28-29 April 2005, the Fourth Criminal Chamber of the Court of First Instance in Tunis sentenced Mohammed Abbou to three and a half years in prison. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison for the article on the Internet denouncing torture in Tunisia and to two years for allegedly assaulting Dalila Mrad, a female lawyer in June 2002, a charge eyewitnesses say was unfounded. An appeal was lodged against the conviction on 6 May 2006 but the sentence was upheld.

Mohammed Abbou went on hunger strike from 11 March to 16 April 2006 to protest his continued detention and harassment by the prison administration. During a family visit on 30 March 2006, Mohammed told his wife that following his request to be moved from a prison cell that he shared with prisoners convicted of common-law offences, he had been kicked and punched by prison guards. Upon hearing Mohammed Abbou's complaints to his wife regarding his ill-treatment, the prison guards interrupted the visit by closing the shutter separating prisoners and visitors, forcing Mohammed and his wife to shout in order to communicate. Shortly afterwards Mohammed Abbou fainted. On 23 March 2006 Mohammed Abbou's family came to see him but were told by prison guards that he was being punished for refusing to enter his cell and could not receive any visitors. On 16 March 2006, a visit by his sister was ended by prison guards shortly after they heard that Mohammed Abbou's wife was in Geneva campaigning on his case with other human rights activists.

The Tunisian authorities have operated systematic Internet censorship since the internet began to be used as a new medium of information. This has been done outside any legal framework, thereby preventing the possibility of any legal challenge. Human rights defenders and civil society activists operate without protection from the government or guarantees that they can carry out their activities without interference or fear of persecution. Those who exercise their right to freedom of expression often face harassment from the authorities and risk being charged with criminal offences.

Take Action:

Your Excellency,

I am writing to express my concern at the continued imprisonment of lawyer and human rights defender Mohammed Abbou, who marked the second anniversary of his detention on 1 March 2007.

I urge you to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of Mohammed Abbou as a prisoner of conscience who was imprisoned solely for the legitimate and peaceful expression of his beliefs. His continued imprisonment violates Tunisia's obligations under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In the meantime, I appeal to you to ensure that Mohammed Abbou's family are able to visit him without facing harassment.

As I am sure you know, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded in 2005 that Abbou's detention was arbitrary and in violation of Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

As a member of the Human Rights Council, Tunisia has an opportunity to show its commitment to human rights by respecting its international human rights obligations and releasing Mohammed Abbou.

APPEALS TO:

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Salutation: Your excellency/Excellence

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