

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## **Tunisia: Former political prisoners face harassment**

The hunger strike staged since 2 October by former political prisoner, Abdellatif Bouhajila, to protest against the authorities' denial to grant him access to medical care and to issue him a passport is a stark reminder of the harassment faced by former political prisoners in Tunisia, said Amnesty International today. The organization urges the Tunisian authorities to accord Bouhajila his rights and to end the harassment and stigmatization of political prisoners following their release.

Since his conditional release in November 2007 following a presidential pardon, Abdellatif Bouhajila was unable to get his medical files from the hospital where he was treated during his imprisonment and his hospital appointments have been systematically postponed, in an apparent attempt to prevent him from receiving the medical care needed. In protest, he started a hunger strike on 2 October. On 12 November, he was visited by two officials from the Tunisian Ministry of Public Health, who asked him about his medical condition and promised to provide medical assistance. At the time of writing, he was still on hunger strike at his home.

Abdellatif Bouhajila had undergone kidney surgery when in prison in 2002 and continues to suffer from heart and kidney problems and his health is said to be poor due to ill-treatment in prison and his multiple hunger strikes. He was charged with membership of a terrorist organization in 2000 and sentenced to 17 years in prison, reduced to 11 years on appeal in 2002.

The dire situation of Abdellatif Bouhajila is emblematic of the difficulties former political prisoners face in Tunisia. Many of them continue to serve an additional sentence of "administrative control", requiring them to report at specific police stations several times per week, to be subjected to close police surveillance, to face difficulties obtaining jobs and medical care, as well as confronting restrictions on movement and travel. The authorities refuse to issue them and, in some cases, their immediate family members with passports in violation of Tunisia's Constitution and international human rights obligations, including Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Tunisia is a party.

Some political prisoners are ordered after their release to reside in a remote area away from their families. For instance, a former political prisoner and member of the banned Islamist organization, Ennahda (Renaissance), Abdallah Zouari, has had his freedom of movement within Tunisia restricted by the authorities since his release in June 2002. He is not allowed to move more than 30km away from Hassi Jerbi, a village near Zarzis, southern Tunisia, some 500km from his home in Tunis, without permission and his requests for permission to visit his wife and children in Tunis have routinely gone unanswered.

Former political prisoners who were able to receive medical care have been subjected to police intimidation inside hospitals. On 13 November 2008, a police officer entered the room of former political prisoner Abdelhamid Jallasi one hour after he had undergone surgery and refused to leave, in spite of instructions from medical staff, contending that he was following instructions given to him.

On 5 November, President Ben Ali ordered the conditional release of 44 political prisoners, including 21 long term prisoners belonging to Ennahda. While Amnesty international welcomes these recent releases, the organization fears that the pattern of harassment against political prisoners will continue unabated following their release and is urging the Tunisian authorities to end such practices.

All 44 prisoners were released to mark the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of President Ben Ali coming to power. Most of the 21 long term political prisoners were held for over 15 years because of their membership of Ennahda, after unfair trials before the Bouchoucha and Bab Saadoun military courts in 1992. They were the last group of Ennahda detainees to remain in prison. Some are reported to be in poor health and in urgent need of medical treatment because of ill-treatment in detention and harsh prison conditions, including prolonged solitary confinement, for many years. These include Mondher Bejaoui, Wahid Serairi and Ridha Boukadi. On 11 November, the Mornaguia prison administration refused to hand Ridha Boukadi his medical file when he went to collect it for further treatment. He suffers from severe kidney problems.

The remaining 23 were released following their arrest and imprisoned in connection to the protests in the mining region of the Gafsa governorate in 2008. They were sentenced on charges such as setting up a group with the aim of causing damage to public and private property and assault on public officials. They included teacher and human rights activist, Zakia Dhifaoui, who was sentenced in July 2008 to four and a half months in prison for her participation in a peaceful demonstration. The demonstration had been organized to call for the release of those detained in connection to previous protests in the region since January 2008. Despite Zakia Dhifaoui's release, no investigation into her allegation of torture and sexual abuse is known to have been ordered.

Hundreds of detainees continue to be held in connection with alleged anti-terrorism offences and are serving sentences imposed after unfair trials. The organization urges the Tunisian authorities to repeal or amend all laws that permit prison sentences for the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression and association.

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