

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Tunisia: Urgent investigation needed into alleged human rights violations in the Gafsa region

Amnesty International today called on the Tunisian government to order an independent investigation into allegations of torture and other abuses by security forces when quelling protests earlier this year in the Gafsa region on the eve of the trial of a local trade union leader and 37 others accused of fomenting the unrest. Adnan Hajji, Secretary General of local office of the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) in Redeyef, and his co-accused are due to go on trial on 4 December 2008 on charges including "forming a criminal group with the aim of destroying public and private property". They could face up to more than ten years of imprisonment if convicted. At least six of 38 accused are to be tried in their absence.

In a letter to Tunisia's Minister of Justice and Human Rights Béchir Tekkari, Amnesty International called for the authorities to disclose the outcome of an official investigation which they said had been set up after police opened fire on demonstrators on 6 June 2008, killing one man and injuring others, sparking allegations that police had used excessive force. The letter also detailed cases in which people suspected of organizing or participating in protests are reported to have been detained and tortured by police who forced them to sign incriminating statements that could be used against them at trial and falsified their arrest dates in official records.

BACKGROUND

The phosphate-rich Gafsa region, in south-east Tunisia, was wracked by a wave of popular protests in the first half of this year. They began in the town of Redeyef after the region's major employer, the Gafsa Phosphate Company, announced the results of a recruitment competition. These were denounced as fraudulent by those who were unsuccessful and others, including the UGTT, and the protests, which developed into a more general protest about high unemployment and rising living costs, then spread to other towns as the authorities deployed large numbers of police and other security forces into the region. Hundreds of protestors were arrested and more than 140 have been charged with offences, some of whom have been convicted and sentenced to jail terms.

Public Document

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