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Public Statement

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Syria: Beatings of PoCs must end, officials who have perpetrated or facilitated abuses must be prosecuted

Amnesty International is alarmed by reports that several prisoners of conscience have recently been subjected to beatings and other ill-treatment by prison guards and criminal detainees in 'Adra prison, near Damascus, and is calling for urgent intervention by the Syrian authorities to halt the abuses and punish those suspected of carrying them out. To date, as is almost always the case in Syria, the authorities have failed to take any action to investigate these abuses or hold those responsible to account.

Leading human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, who has been detained since May 2006, was severely beaten on 25 January 2007 at 'Adra prison by guards who also made him crawl on all fours and forcibly shaved his head. This occurred after some of the criminal detainees held in the same section of the prison as Anwar al-Bunni mounted a protest over having not benefited from a recent amnesty. Kamal al-Labwani, who has been detained since November 2005 after calling for political reform in Syria, also reportedly had his head forcibly shaved by prison guards after the protest. He was then placed into a filthy, rat- and insect-infested cell where he was made to sleep on the floor.

Three weeks before these incidents, on 31 December 2006, Anwar al-Bunni was assaulted by a criminal detainee, who pushed him down some stairs and then beat him on the head in the presence of prison guards who, however, failed to intervene.

These assaults are the latest in a longstanding pattern of abuse of political detainees who appear to have been singled out for abuse on account of their promotion of human rights and democracy. In June 2006, Fateh Jamus, a former prisoner of conscience who was rearrested a month earlier after returning from a trip to Europe, was severely beaten by three criminal detainees at 'Adra prison, but the authorities took no action against his attackers. He was released on bail in October. Kamal al-Labwani was also reportedly assaulted by a criminal detainee at 'Adra prison in November 2006. In other cases, high profile prisoners have been subjected to harsh conditions. During 2005 former members of parliament Riad Seif and Ma'mun al-Homsi were forced to share cells with criminal detainees at times during their imprisonment whom it appeared had been given orders by the authorities to cause them physical and psychological difficulties. Economics professor 'Aref Dalilah, who is 63 years old, has been spent most of his more than five years in prison in solitary confinement; his cell is reported to be damp and cold in winter and too small for him to exercise. He has diabetes and high blood pressure and suffered a stroke in late 2006 which has left him completely numb down the left side of his body, yet he has reportedly been denied access to independent medical care by the prison authorities.

'Adra prison, located about 20 km north-east of Damascus, is administered by Syria's Interior Ministry except for its wing for political detainees that is under control of the Political Security agency. Despite the

assaults and other ill-treatment reported above, conditions in the prison are believed to be less severe than in certain other Syrian prisons, where torture and other ill-treatment of detainees is widespread.

Amnesty International is calling on the Syrian authorities to take steps immediately to ensure that Anwar al-Bunni, Kamal al-Labwani and all other prisoners of conscience and other inmates at 'Adra prison are protected against torture or ill-treatment. Those responsible for committing assaults against them, and officials responsible for condoning or acquiescing in such assaults and other ill-treatment should be removed from their positions forthwith and held to account.

The Syrian authorities should also take steps to ensure that prisoners of conscience and other political detainees are not held together with criminal prisoners. Article 8 of the UNs Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners states that, "The different categories of prisoners shall be kept in separate institutions or parts of institutions". The Standard Minimum Rules were adopted by the First United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, held at Geneva in 1955, and approved by the Economic and Social Council by its resolution 663 C (XXIV) of 31 July 1957 and 2076 (LXII) of 13 May 1977. Amnesty International also repeats its call for the authorities' to release immediately and unconditionally and to drop all charges against Anwar al-Bunni, Kamal al-Labwani, Fateh Jamous, 'Aref Dalilah and all other individuals detained on account of their legitimate work in promotion of human rights and /or for the peaceful expression of their beliefs.

Background

Anwar al-Bunni is one of three signatories to the "Beirut-Damascus Declaration" detained since May 2006 and facing charges including insulting the President, government officials or public servants. The Declaration called for normalization of relations between Syria and Lebanon. Former prisoner of conscience Kamal al-Labwani was arrested in November 2005 on his return to Syria after several months in Europe and the USA during which he called peacefully for democratic reform. He is charged with "encouraging foreign aggression against Syria". Former prisoner of conscience Fateh Jamus was arrested in May 2006 on his return from a trip to Europe, during which he called for peaceful reform in Syria. Charges against him included "broadcasting abroad false or exaggerated news that would damage the reputation of the state," although it is unclear whether all were dropped after a presidential amnesty. Riad Seif, Ma'mun al-Homsi and 'Aref Dalilah were among a group of individuals arrested in September 2001 for their involvement in the pro-reform movement referred to as the "Damascus Spring". Riad Seif, Ma'mun al-Homsi were sentenced to five years' imprisonment and freed on 18 January 2006, while 'Aref Dalilah was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment.