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Syria: Unfair trial of Kurdish prisoners of conscience and torture of children is totally unacceptable

Amnesty International today condemned the unfair trial by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) of seven Kurdish prisoners of conscience, and the alleged torture and ill-treatment of Kurdish minors held in the custody of the Syrian authorities for months without trial.

All seven men were convicted by the SSSC on 27 June 2004 of "belonging to a secret organization" and "attempting to sever part of the Syrian territory and annex it to a foreign state". The seven men were arrested on 25 June 2003 for taking part in a peaceful Kurdish children's demonstration in front of the UNICEF building in Damascus calling for the rights of Syrian Kurds to be respected including their right to be taught in the Kurdish language. During their trial the defendants told the SSSC that they were tortured and ill-treated in detention and held in solitary confinement in small cells. One detainee, Muhammad Mustafa, stated before the SSSC that he was being held in a toilet. Their allegations were ignored by the court.

Three of the seven men, Muhammed Mustafa, Sherif Ramadhan, and Khaled Ahmad 'Ali, were sentenced to five years in prison reduced immediately to two years, and the four others, 'Amr Morad, Solar Saleh, Hosan Muhammad Amin and Hussayn Ramadhan, were sentenced to five years reduced immediately to one year. The four were ordered to be released having already spent one year in prison since their arrest.

Amnesty International calls on the Syrian authorities to drop the charges brought against the seven men and calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Muhammad Mustafa, Sherif Ramadhan, and Khaled Ahmad 'Ali. The organization considers the detention and trial of the seven men a violation of their right to freedom of expression and assembly as guaranteed by Article 38 and Article 39 of the Syrian Constitution, and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which Syria is a state party.

Amnesty International is also gravely concerned about news that Kurdish children arrested in the wake of March 2004 events in Qamishli and other parts of northern Syria have been tortured and ill-treated while held incommunicado at security and police detention centres. The organization has received the names of more than 20 children, aged between 14 to 17 years, who have reportedly been subjected to various types of torture, leaving scars on their bodies, and leading to serious injuries including broken noses, perforated ear drums and infected wounds. Among the torture techniques reportedly applied against the children were:

Applying electric shocks on hands and feet and sensitive parts of the body;
Extraction of toe nails;
Holding the heads of children and banging them violently against each other causing injuries and bleeding from the nose. One of the children continues to suffer nose bleeds after being released;
Beating with electric cables and rifle butts;
Ordering the children to strip almost naked while counting from one to three, then beating them if they do not complete the stripping while counting.

Over 20 children are still known to be in detention having been held for over three months. These and others face various charges including "congregation in a manner that may disturb public tranquility"; "uttering phrases that may cause discord among the elements of the nation" and; "[carrying out] attacks with the intent of preventing authorities from carrying out their functions". Amnesty International is particularly concerned that these children continue to be held without trial. In addition, contrary to the provisions of the Syrian law and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to which Syria is a state party, these children have been and continue to be held along with adults. Article 37(b) of the CRC states that the arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.

Amnesty International, therefore, calls on the Syrian authorities to release all Kurdish children held in connection with the 12 March events pending their trial, to ensure that they are given a fair trial according to international standards for fair trial, to order as a matter of urgency an independent and thorough investigation into reports of torture and ill-treatment, and to ensure that children subjected to torture are immediately provided with specialist medical and psychological care.