



To: Health Professional Network

From: Health and Human Rights Team

Date: 25 July 2005

## Medical action

### Health concern: six imprisoned human rights defenders Syria

#### Summary

Amnesty International (AI) is concerned about the health of **Mamun al-Humsi, Riad Seif, ‘Aref Dalilah, Muhammad Ra’dun, Nizar Ristnawi, and Mas’oud Hamid**, human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience in Syria. In addition to their imprisonment solely on the basis of the peaceful expression of their beliefs, the organization has the following concerns:

- **Hunger-strikes:** Mamun al-Humsi and ‘Aref Dalilah have been on hunger-strike since 5 July and 12 July respectively.
- **Incommunicado detention:** Mamun al-Humsi is reportedly held incommunicado at Tishrin Military Hospital. Nizar Ristnawi has reportedly been held incommunicado in Sednaya Prison since his arrest on 18 April 2005. They may be at risk of torture or ill-treatment in incommunicado detention.
- **Lack of medical treatment:** AI is calling for access to full independent medical examinations for Muhammad Ra’dun and Mas’oud Hamid and appropriate treatment (see case details below).

AI calls for the immediate and unconditional release of the six men named above, for access to appropriate medical care where needed and an end to the practice of incommunicado detention.

## **Case details**

### ***Mamun al-Humsi***

AI is very concerned that Mamun al-Humsi has apparently been held incommunicado at Tishrin Military Hospital since early July. On 5 July 2005, in a statement which condemned repression of freedom of expression and democracy in Syria, he declared a hunger-strike. Reportedly he was transferred soon after from 'Adra Prison to Tishrin Military Hospital, Damascus.

Mamun al-Humsi, aged 49, formerly an independent member of the Syrian People's Assembly (Parliament) and a businessman, was arrested by police on 9 August 2001. Two days previously he had issued a statement, accompanied by a hunger strike, calling for political and economic reform in Syria and denouncing corruption and the broad powers wielded by the security forces.

Mamun al Humsi was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in March 2002, charged with offences including "attempting to change the Constitution by illegal means". During his trial members of his family were harassed, beaten up and detained by the security forces. Prisoners sentenced according to the Criminal Penal Code are eligible for release after serving three quarters of their sentence. Mamun al-Humsi has already served three quarters of his sentence but remains in prison.

During his first week of detention in 'Adra prison in August 2001, Mamun al-Humsi was reportedly denied family visits and access to medication, which he takes regularly for diabetes. On 23 July 2003 Mamun al-Humsi suffered a heart attack. His health had been deteriorating during the previous weeks, during which he had also had hospital treatment for kidney stones.

### ***Riad Seif***

AI is very concerned for the health of Riad Seif. Apparently one of the main arteries in his heart is blocked. He was recently treated with a catheter in an attempt to unblock the artery. However, it seems that the procedure was unsuccessful and he needs open-heart surgery. He is reportedly refusing to undergo surgery in protest at his continuing imprisonment. Prisoners sentenced according to the Criminal Penal Code are eligible for release after serving three quarters of their sentence. Riad Seif has already served three quarters of his sentence but remains in 'Adra prison.

Riad Seif, aged 54, formerly an independent member of the Syrian People's Assembly and businessman, was arrested on 6 September 2001. The day before he had hosted a political seminar at his house. During this seminar guest speaker, Professor Burhan Ghaliun, called for political reform and democratic elections. In March 2001 Riad Seif had issued a discussion paper on the principles of *Harakat al Silm*, Social Peace Movement (a new organization he was apparently planning to establish).

On 4 April 2002 Riad Seif was sentenced to five years' imprisonment on a number of charges including "attempting to change the Constitution by illegal means" and "inciting sectarian strife". During Riad Seif's detention, his wife has on occasion been subjected to harassment and intimidation by the Syrian authorities.

### ***'Aref Dalilah***

AI is very concerned for the health of 'Aref Dalilah who has had a history of medical problems since his detention in 2001, including heart problems. On 12 July 2005 he began a hunger-strike in protest against his solitary confinement and ill-treatment.

'Aref Dalilah, aged around 62 years, was arrested in Damascus in September 2001. 'Aref Dalilah was dismissed from his post as Dean of the Faculty of Economics, reportedly due to his outspoken views against corruption and his calls for granting freedom of expression to complement economic reform. He was also said to have taken part in the political seminar held on 5 September 2001 in the house of parliamentarian Riad Seif. 'Aref Dalilah was

reportedly held initially incommunicado and in solitary confinement in 'Adra prison, before being allowed family visits.

On 31 July 2002 'Aref Dalilah was sentenced by the SSSC to ten years' imprisonment on charges of "attempting to change the constitution by illegal means".

'Aref Dalilah was taken from his cell at the beginning of April 2002 to a hospital in Damascus, suffering from deep vein thrombosis. Although he was in urgent need of appropriate medication and specialist medical care, he was returned to prison before receiving either. Reportedly he was also beaten and ill-treated while he was held in 'Adra prison.

There were further concerns for 'Aref Dalilah's health during the latter part of 2004 when he was suffering from high blood pressure and an irregular heart-beat. Political Security officers apparently summoned his family members to persuade him to have a heart bypass operation but he refused to have one until he is released from prison. He apparently remains in solitary confinement.

### ***Muhammad Ra'dun***

Muhammad Ra'dun's health is reported to have deteriorated severely since he was detained on 22 May. He reportedly suffers from a longstanding respiratory illness which should be fully assessed and appropriately treated. Mucus reportedly builds up in the trachea until it prevents him breathing properly. The disease has caused him great distress and sleep loss for fear of choking in his sleep. He has lost around 13 kg. His wife was allowed to visit him on 11 July, but no one has been allowed to see him since then.

Muhammad Ra'dun, aged 56, lawyer and head of the Arab Organisation for Human Rights-Syria (AOHR-S), was arrested on 22 May 2005. His arrest was apparently in connection with statements made by the AOHR-S on human rights in Syria. He is also being held in 'Adra prison and awaiting trial on charges of "disseminating false information" and with "involvement in an illegal organisation of an international nature".

At the UN Human Rights Committee on 18 July 2005<sup>1</sup>, the Syrian delegation responded to questions on Muhammad Ra'dun by saying his arrest was related to the AOHR-S statement about the death in custody of Ahmad 'Ali al-Masalma, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood - an organisation which is banned in Syria - who died in 2005 following his release from detention. His death appears to have resulted from torture and ill-treatment suffered in detention in Syria (see public statement MDE 24/025/2005).

### ***Nizar Ristnawi***

AI is very concerned at the effects prolonged incommunicado detention may have on Nizar Ristnawi's health and that he may be at the risk of torture and other ill-treatment whilst held without access to lawyers and family.

Nizar Ristnawi, a founding member of the AOHR-S, was arrested on 18 April 2005. He is currently held in Sednaya Prison, on the outskirts of Damascus. He has been detained incommunicado since his arrest.

Nizar Ristnawi's case has apparently been referred to the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), whose standards fall far short of international standards for fair trial. The charges against him are not known. He is apparently held solely for carrying out his peaceful and legitimate work in defence of human rights.

### ***Mas'oud Hamid***

AI is very concerned that Mas'oud Hamid is suffering from severe headaches, dizziness and has numbness in one of his feet, apparently as a result of torture. His glasses were broken, and when he asked for an eye test to obtain new glasses, the prison doctor told him he was not

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<sup>1</sup> The Human Rights Committee 84th Session (11 - 29 July 2005) in Geneva concerning the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in Syria.

short-sighted. He has been given ibuprofen for the headaches. AI calls for Mas'oud Hamid to be given a full medical examination to determine the cause of his headaches, dizziness and numbness and to be treated appropriately.

Mas'oud Hamid, Syrian Kurdish student of journalism, attended a peaceful protest on 25 June 2003, calling for civil and political rights for the Syrian Kurdish population, including the right of Syrian Kurdish children to be taught in the Kurdish language. The demonstration was dispersed violently by police and security forces. Mas'oud Hamid was arrested by Public Security officers after he posted photographs he took of the demonstration on several internet sites including the German-based Kurdish website [www.amude.com](http://www.amude.com). He is now held in 'Adra prison.

On 10 October 2004, he was sentenced by the SSSC to five years' imprisonment for membership of a "secret organisation" and "attempting to sever part of Syrian territory and annex it to a foreign state", charges commonly made against Kurds in Syria. He was reportedly tortured during interrogation. According to AI's information he was also subjected to torture after participating in a hunger strike in October 2004 along with a number of other Syrian Kurds, in protest at prison conditions, including their being held in solitary confinement. He was apparently beaten on his head and back.

## **Political background**

The arrests of Riad Seif, Mamun al-Humsi and 'Aref Dalilah in 2001 came during the so-called "Damascus Spring" period which followed the election of President Bashar al-Assad in 2000. President Bashar al-Assad indicated in his inauguration speech a desire to increase tolerance for free speech and to allow political reforms. This led to the establishment of a number of forums where public affairs, political reforms and cultural issues were discussed. The authorities started to clamp down on this new freedom of expression in early 2001 but groups like the National Dialogue Forum led by parliamentarian Riad Seif continued their activities in defiance of the restrictions. This appeared to have been one of the reasons which triggered a wave of arrests in August and September 2001.

The past few months have seen another escalation in the clamping down on freedom of expression of members of the opposition and also human rights defenders. This has included the arrests of Muhammad Ra'dun and Nizar Ristnawi in, respectively, May and April 2005.

## **Recommended action**

Please write to the authorities below:

- Introducing yourself as a health professional interested in human rights;
- Expressing concern for the health of Mamun al-Humsi, Riad Seif, Muhammad Ra'dun, Nizar Ristnawi, 'Aref Dalilah and Mas'oud Hamid;
- Expressing concern in particular at reports that: Mamun al-Humsi and 'Aref Dalilah have been on hunger-strike since 5 July and 12 July respectively; Mamun al-Humsi is reportedly held incommunicado at Tishrin Military Hospital and Nizar Ristnawi in Sednaya Prison; Muhammad Ra'dun and Mas'oud Hamid are in need of a full independent medical examination and appropriate treatment;
- Calling for immediate and unconditional release of these six men who have been imprisoned solely for the peaceful expression of their beliefs;
- Calling for access to appropriate medical care for these men;
- Calling for an end to the practice of incommunicado detention;

- Asking for assurances that they are not being subjected to torture and/or other ill-treatment;
- Inviting a response to your letter.

### **List of related documents**

Urgent actions on Mamun al-Humsi: MDE 24/026/2001; MDE 24/002/2001; MDE 24/003/2002; MDE 24/027/2003;

Medical action on Mamun al-Humsi: MDE 24/006/2002, March 2002

UAs on Riad Seif: MDE 24/029/2001; MDE 24/030/2001; MDE 24/033/2001; MDE 24/010/2002;

UAs on ‘Aref Dalilah: MDE 24/030/2001; MDE 24/10/2002; MDE 24/011/2002; MDE 24/041/2002;

UAs on Muhammad Ra’dun and Nizar Ristnawi: MDE 24/033/2005; MDE 24/043/2005; MDE 24/037/2005.

UAs on Mas’oud Hamid: MDE 24/021/2003, 26 June 2003; MDE 24/067/2004, 15 October 2004; MDE 24/035/2003, 18 September 2003; MDE 24/049/2004, 29 June 2004; and MDE 24/050/2005, 15 July 2005.

Report: *Syria: Smothering freedom of expression: the detention of peaceful critics*, MDE 24/007/2002, June 2002.

Report: *Syria: Kurds in the Syrian Arab Republic one year after the March 2004 events*, MDE 24/002/2005, March 2005.

Public statement: *Syria: Ongoing risks for Syrian returnees*, MDE 24/025/2005, May 2005.

Memorandum from AI to the HRC concerning the implementation of the ICCPR, MDE 24/047/2005 and update MDE 24/048/2005.

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Please also write to diplomatic representatives of Syria accredited to your country.

If you receive no reply within six weeks of sending your letter, please send a follow-up letter seeking a response. Please send copies of any letters you receive to the International Secretariat, attention of Health and Human Rights Team.