

## **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL EU OFFICE PRESS RELEASE**

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### **EU-ALGERIA POLITICAL DIALOGUE ROME (MONDAY): MOMENT OF TRUTH FOR HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITMENTS IN THE EU-ALGERIA ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT**

(Brussels 31 October 2003) As EU Ministers and the European Commission prepare to meet the Algerian Foreign Minister in Rome on Monday (3 November), Amnesty International today calls on the Italian EU Presidency to demand evidence that Algeria is prepared to fulfil its undertakings in the EU-Algeria Association Agreement, soon to be ratified by all parties.

In particular, Amnesty International calls on the Italian Presidency to demand that Algeria takes concrete steps to address the issue of the “disappearance” of at least 4,000 people, to ensure mass graves are properly investigated and to remind Algeria of its international obligations towards human rights defenders.

“The EU must challenge Algeria to come forward with meaningful steps to counter the impunity for past human rights abuses,” Dick Oosting Director of Amnesty International’s EU Office said. “Allowing the truth about a decade of violence to come to light and cooperating with UN human rights experts are two very basic benchmarks Algeria should meet to show its good faith, and this is how the EU should mark the new relationship.”

#### **“Disappearances”**

On 20 September, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika established an ad hoc mechanism that reportedly is to serve as an interface between the Algerian authorities and the families of the thousands who have “disappeared” following arrests by Algerian security forces or state-armed militias since 1993. The decree defining the competences and detailed terms of references for the new mechanism has not been made public. Amnesty International fears that the mechanism might not have the powers and resources it should have, such as the competence to compel state security officials suspected of being implicated in “disappearances” to testify.

#### **Amnesty calls on the EU to:**

- 1) Press the Algerian authorities for assurances that the ad hoc mechanism will be independent, empowered, effective and committed to bringing those responsible for "disappearances" to justice;
- 2) Urge Algeria to facilitate the visit of the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances without further delay. This expert body of the UN Commission on Human Rights asked to visit Algeria in 2000 and has not yet been granted access.

## **Mass graves**

Mass grave sites discovered in recent years have not been thoroughly investigated. To Amnesty International's knowledge, out of the scores of bodies exhumed from mass grave sites since 1998, only a few have been identified. In contrast to the current practice in Algeria, disinterment should be carried out only by professionals skilled in forensic anthropology.

### **Amnesty calls on the EU to:**

- 1) Press the Algerian authorities to ensure that mass grave sites will be investigated in accordance with international standards, such as the UN Model Protocol for Disinterment and Analysis of Skeletal Remains;
- 2) Offer support to ensure that the Algerian authorities dispose of relevant expertise and equipment.

## **Human rights defenders**

Amnesty International has welcomed the acquittal of Algerian human rights activist Salaheddine Sidhoum on 16 October as a step toward ending Algeria's record of intimidating those who work to protect human rights in Algeria. Sidhoum, a physician, has been documenting human rights violations and disseminating reports detailing incidents of torture, summary executions and "disappearances" since the late 1980s.

At the same time, the pressure on activists trying to uncover the truth about the most serious human rights violations committed over the past decade continues. In particular, families of the "disappeared" campaigning on behalf of their missing relatives, have not been able to legally register their associations and remain vulnerable to police harassment and intimidation.

### **Amnesty calls on the EU to:**

- 1) Remind the Algerian authorities of their obligation under international standards to ensure that human rights defenders are able to enjoy all their rights and freedoms in practice and to carry out their work without harassment or intimidation;
- 2) Call on the Algerian authorities to allow organizations working on "disappearances" to become legally registered associations.

Amnesty International's recent report: "*Algeria: Steps towards change or empty promises?*" (available in English and French on [www.amnesty-eu.org](http://www.amnesty-eu.org)) shows that the human rights situation in Algeria, although improved, remains of serious concern.

Around 100 people continue to be killed each month by armed groups, security forces and state-armed militias. Torture in state custody continues to be widespread, and investigations into human rights abuses are rarely carried out. The legacy of a decade of violence is yet to be concretely addressed and the Algerian authorities continue to deny that state agents have been responsible for widespread patterns of human rights violations.

**For further comment/background and interviews:**

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