

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

AI Index: MDE 30/002/2005 (Public)

News Service No: 054

8 March 2005

### **Tunisia: Preparing for the World Summit on Information Society starts with violence and arrests of human rights defenders and peaceful demonstrators**

Amnesty International is concerned about the recent escalation in intimidation and violence against peaceful demonstrators in Tunisia, a few months before the country is due to host the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS), an inter-governmental and civil society meeting organized by the United Nations in November.

Following news of the government's invitation to Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon to attend the WSIS meeting, several demonstrations took place in various parts of the country to protest against this decision. On 4 March, many people, including human rights defenders, were reportedly physically assaulted as several hundred members of the police forces were deployed to bar various small groups from gathering for a demonstration in the centre of the capital Tunis. The demonstration was called by political parties and independent non governmental organizations following the authorities' refusal to give them authorization to hold a meeting.

Human rights defender and lawyer, Radhia Nasraoui, who was on her way to the demonstration meeting point, was brutally beaten by police officers. As a result of the attack, she reported having a fractured nose, cuts on her forehead and bruises over various part of her body. Her daughter, who was with her at the time of the assault, was also beaten; she fainted and is reported to have bruises on her body and several stitches on the head. Radhia Nasraoui was apparently specially targeted because of her outspoken criticism following the arrest of lawyer Mohammed Abbou last week.

In addition, former prisoner of conscience, Najoua Rezgui, who was at a cafe around the time of demonstration, was also attacked by members of the police forces. She was reportedly taken to hospital because of the injuries she sustained as a result of the assault. Scores of other demonstrators were arrested; most of them are known to have been released on 5 March.

On 1 March, Mohammed Abbou, lawyer and member of the National Council for (Civil) Liberties in Tunisia (*Conseil national pour les libertés en Tunisie*, CNLT), was detained on charges of disseminating false information, libel, enticing people to break the law and publishing offences. He has reportedly been denied the right to have a lawyer. Mohammed Abbou was arrested last week for publishing an article in August 2004 denouncing torture in Tunisia following the interest generated by images of torture practised on Iraqi prisoners in Abou Ghraib. However, it is widely believed that his arrest was linked to a recent article he wrote on Ariel Sharon's visit to Tunisia. On 2 March, hundreds of lawyers gathered at the Palais de Justice in Tunis to protest against Mohammed Abbou's arrest; many of them were reportedly physically assaulted by plain-clothed police officers, including the wife of Mohammed Abbou.

On 28 February, several students were arrested following demonstrations in Sfax, southern Tunisia. Five of them, including two female students, were detained and allegedly tortured while at the police station in Sfax. The allegations of torture included suspension from the ceiling and beating on the sole of the feet. Some of them have reportedly broken wrists and bruises on the face.

The cases and incidents mentioned above are just a few examples of a long-standing campaign of repression in Tunisia. Amnesty international condemns these attacks and urges the Tunisian authorities to respect the country's obligations under Tunisian law and international human rights standards and to put an end to the continuing repression of freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. The organization also calls on the authorities to guarantee the protection of human rights defenders and civil society activists and ensure that they are able to carry out their activities without interference or fear of persecution.

### **Background**

During the conclusion of the first phase of the WSIS that took place in Geneva in December 2003, a Declaration of Principles was adopted, in which respect for human rights and freedom of expression were reiterated as fundamental elements to the building of an information society where access to information, ideas and knowledge across the globe is guaranteed without restrictions. In disregard to these principles and the fact that Tunisia will host the second phase of the WSIS, practices violating these rights continue in Tunisia. Amnesty International has for many years highlighted violations of the right to freedom of expression and association in Tunisia. Since the early 1990s, freedom of expression, association and assembly has been markedly restricted in the country. Independent human rights organizations have been denied legal registration or hampered in their activities. Freedom of the press is virtually non-existent and the government has repeatedly blocked access to several internet website.