

ALGERIA: Call for the release of nine arbitrarily arrested labour rights activists

Copenhagen-Paris-Geneva, February 10, 2015 – On February 11, 2015, the Laghouat Court of First Instance will issue the verdict for two trials of nine Algerian labour rights defenders. Our organisations call for their immediate, unconditional release and denounce their arbitrary arrest and the judicial harassment against them, as their detention seems to only aim at sanctioning their human rights activities.

Mr. **Mohamed Rag**, an active member of the National Committee for the Defence of the Rights of Unemployed Workers (*Comité National pour la Défense des Droits de Chômeurs - CNDDC*), was arrested on January 22, 2015 in front of his home by police officers who had come to arrest a presumed thief. Mr. Rag was taken away with the alleged thief for refusing to answer a policewoman who had spoken to him. He was immediately placed under a detention warrant in application of a *flagrante delicto* procedure and accused of “*assaulting a security force agent in the exercise of his duties*”, under Article 148 of the Penal Code. His lawyer denies that any act of violence was committed and denounces the misuse of authority by the police as well as the unsubstantiated charges. At the end of the first hearing, on January 28, the prosecutor requested a one-year prison term.

Eight other CNDDC activists who were close to Mr. Mohamed Rag, some of whom witnessed his arrest, were arrested in turn on January 28, 2015 during the first hearing against Mr. Rag. They wanted to meet in front of the city court to demand that Mr. Rag be released. According to the defence lawyers, the police arrested them upon arrival, before they started their demonstration. Messrs. **Khencha Belkacem, Brahimi Belelmi, Mazouzi Benallal, Azzouzi Boubakeur, Korini Belkacem, Bekouider Faouzi, Bensarkha Tahar and Djaballah Abdelkader** are being charged with “*gathering*” (Art. 97 of the Penal Code) and “*exercising pressure on the decisions of magistrates*” (art. 147 of the Penal Code). Their hearing was held on February 4, 2015. The prosecutor requested a two-year prison term.

The nine activists are known in the area for their commitment to defend human rights. On January 17, 2015, they had participated in a sit-in to show their solidarity with the inhabitants of the city of In Salah who have been demonstrating peacefully since December 2014 to protest against shale gas operations. Although the state of emergency was lifted in 2011, unauthorised demonstrations are still equated to illegal gatherings. Therefore, participants can be taken to courts and can be sentenced to a term ranging from two months to three years' imprisonment.

Mr. Rag was already arrested on February 20, 2013 at a demonstration in front of the Laghouat labour office when he came to claim the right to work. He was charged with “*gathering*”, “*inciting gathering*”, and “*destruction of property belonging to others*”, and was finally acquitted on March 12, 2013. Similarly, he was acquitted for lack of evidence on July 13, 2014 in another case related to a demonstration in Laghouat on June 8, 2014. After another demonstration, held three months later, Mohamed Rag, Khencha Belkacem, Brahimi Belelmi, Azzouzi Boubakeur and two other young people were charged with “*armed gathering*” and “*insulting a civil servant*”; they were acquitted on November 30, 2014.

Our organisations call upon the Algerian authorities to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Messrs. Mohamed Rag, Khencha Belkacem, Brahimi Belelmi, Mazouzi Benallal, Azzouzi Boubakeur, Korini Belkacem, Bekouider Faouzi, Bensarkha Tahar and Djaballah Abdelkader, as their detention seems to only aim at sanctioning their human rights activities;
- Put an end to any act of harassment against them, including at the judicial level, in compliance with the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders;
- Guarantee the right to freedom of assembly, association and expression, in compliance with the Algerian Constitution and the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by Algeria.

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