

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

SYRIA: Verdict against 3 prominent human rights defenders expected on March 25

Paris-Geneva, March 18, 2015 – According to subpoenas issued by the President of Damascus Anti-terrorism Court, Messrs. Mazen Darwish, Hani Al-Zaitani and Hussain Ghrer, will appear before the court on March 25, 2015 for the verdict hearing. The Observatory calls for the immediate and unconditional release of the three human rights defenders, who have been arbitrarily detained for more than three years for promoting and protecting human rights in Syria.

On March 5, 2015, the President of the Damascus Anti-terrorism Court set March 25, 2015 as the new date for the verdict hearing in the criminal case against Messrs. **Mazen Darwish, Hani Al-Zaitani and Hussain Ghrer, respectively President and members of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)**. The same subpoena also ordered the transfer of Mr. Mazen Darwish from Hama central prison to Damascus Prison via Homs Central prison, as well as the transfer of Mr Hani Zaitani from Swedaa Central prison to Damascus prison.

The Observatory draws attention to the fact that the trial has been marred by excessive delays. The verdict hearing has already been scheduled six times and since the trial was opened before the Anti-terrorism court in February 2013, it has been suspended 18 times.

“At minimum, the Syrian authorities shall guarantee Mazen Darwish, Hani Al-Zaitani and Hussain Ghrer's right to a fair trial before an independent and impartial court, including the right to be tried within a reasonable delay”, said FIDH President, Karim Lahidji.

The Observatory further underlines that the UN General Assembly, in Resolution 67/262 adopted on May 15, 2013 called for the release of the three defenders. In January 2014, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) also found that the three defenders had been arbitrarily deprived of their liberty due to their human rights activities and called for their immediate release. UN Security Council Resolution 2139, adopted on February 22, 2014, also demanded the release of all arbitrarily detained people in Syria.

“Syrian authorities should heed UN calls and immediately and unconditionally release Messrs Mazen Darwish, Hani Zaitani and Hussein Greer as their detention is arbitrary and only aims at preventing them from carrying out their legitimate and peaceful human rights activities in Syria”, concluded OMCT Secretary General Gerald Staberock.

Mazen Darwish, Hani Al-Zaitani and Hussain Ghrer are detained since February 2012, for promoting freedom of expression and monitoring gross human rights violations committed in the country through their work in the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom. During nine months, they were held in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance and subjected to acts of torture. There has been no investigation into these abuses.

On February 26, 2015 Mazen Darwish was named “World Press Freedom Hero” by the International Press Institute in recognition of “his efforts to ensure that the truth of what was happening in his country after conflict erupted in 2011 was known beyond its borders, and in his willingness to continue speaking out in support of free media from prison, despite the obvious danger to him in doing so”.

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OBS) was created in 1997 by FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). The objective of this

programme is to intervene to prevent or remedy to situations of repression against human rights defenders.

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