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EURO-MEDITERRANEAN HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK
RÉSEAU EURO-MÉDITERRANÉEN DES DROITS DE L'HOMME
الشبكة الأوروبية - المتوسطية لحقوق الإنسان

JOINT PRESS RELEASE

SYRIA: Escalation of acts of harassment and arbitrary arrests of lawyers

Copenhagen, Geneva, Paris, August 25, 2011. The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), strongly condemn the continuous harassment and the multiplication of arbitrary arrests and assaults of lawyers in Syria, while the country remains the theatre of massive human rights violations.

Numerous gatherings have recently been organised by groups of lawyers across the country to demand the end of the repression of peaceful demonstrators and the respect of human rights and democratic principles. In most cases, the security apparatus and the pro-regime “*chabiha*” militias have tried to stop gatherings, attacking participants and conducting arbitrary arrests.

On August 22, a group of lawyers organised a gathering in front of the courthouse in the Eastern city of Raqqa. Our organisations have been informed that at least 19 lawyers were arrested, namely Messrs. **Abdallah Al Khalif, Abdul Razaq Al Setm, Ashid Al Aly Almoussa, Ali Al Fares, Fahed Al Birm, Farhan Alnoani, Ghaleb Amin, Mahmoud Aicha, Mahmoud Al Hadi, Mahmoud Al Isa, Mahmoud Al Tiyaoui, Mahmud Wali, Mohammad Shalash, Oboud Nouheir Al Ourian, Omar Al Aly Al Khalil, Yasser Ahmad Al Kerbou, Ms. Rana Ibrahim and Ms. Rim Shanaa** (who is pregnant), in addition to the lawyer and human rights activist **Abdullah Al Khalil**. According to information received at the time of publication, while Ms. Rana Ibrahim and Ms. Rim Shanaa were released on August 24, the rest of the lawyers remained detained incommunicado. Our organisations consider that there is a high risk that these persons be subjected to ill-treatment or torture.

On August 23, lawyers in several major cities organised gatherings in front of courthouses and local offices of the Syrian Bar Association in order to condemn the arbitrary arrests and abuses committed by members of the security apparatus against lawyers, and to criticise the lack of independence of the Syrian Bar Association. Sit-ins were notably held in Damascus, Soueida, Hassakeh and Aleppo. In Hassakeh, several lawyers, including **Moustafa Osso**, Chairman of the Kurdish organisation for human rights “DAD”, were assaulted in the presence of the President of the Hassakeh Branch of the Syrian Bar Association. In the evening of the same day, lawyer and human rights activist **Mohammed Issam Zaghoul** was arrested in Damascus. It is believed that his arrest follows his participation in the sit-in held in front of the Damascus Bar Association.

In the last three months, more than 80 lawyers have been subjected to arbitrary arrests due to their peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. Nevertheless, lawyers contacted by our organisations corroboratorily indicate that the Syrian Bar Association has consistently failed to bring support to its members though imprisoned or abused by the security apparatus. Our organisations condemn this repression and fear that it merely aim at sanctioning their activities in favour of human rights in contradiction with the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998). We recall that the “right to hold opinion without interference” and the “right to peaceful assembly” are guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Articles 19 and 21), to which Syria is a state party.

The Observatory and the EMHRN urge the Syrian authorities to respect in all circumstances the integrity of lawyers, to grant them unrestricted access to courtrooms and courthouses, to respect the right of lawyers to freedoms of expression and peaceful demonstration and to put an end to all forms of harassment or measures of intimidation, including disciplinary procedures arbitrarily undertaken by the Bar Association against lawyers.

More generally, our organisations vehemently denounce the serious human rights violations committed against the demonstrators by the Syrian authorities since the beginning of the protest movement.

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