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SHRC | REPORTS | 2000 | 1st March

Forcible Disappearance of Political Detainees in Syrian Prisons - 1 March 2000

"Some men arrive. They force their way into a family's home, rich or poor, house, hovel or hut, in a city or in a village, anywhere. They come at any time of the day or night, usually in plain clothes, sometimes in uniform, always carrying weapons. Giving no reason, producing no arrest warrant, frequently without saying who they are or on whose authority they are acting, they drag one or more members of the family towards a car, using violence if necessary" (Disappearance! Technique of Terror, Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, London, 1986).

This is often the first act in the drama of an enforced or involuntary disappearance, a particularly heinous of human rights. A disappearance is a doubly paralysing form of suffering: for the victims, frequently tortured and in constant fear of their lives, and for their family members, ignorant of the fate of their loved ones, their emotions altering between hope and despair, wondering and waiting, sometimes for years, for news that may never come. The victims are well aware that their families do not know what has become of them and that the chances are slim that anyone will come to their aid. Having been removed from the protective precinct of law and "disappeared" from society, they are in fact deprived of all their rights and are at the mercy of their captors. If death is not the final outcome and they are eventually released from the nightmare, the victim may suffer for a long time from the physical and psychological consequences of this form of dehumanisation and from the brutality and torture which often accompany it. (Fact Sheet No. 6: Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances).

This accurate description corresponds to the practices of Syrian security authorities for some 25 years now. The Syrian senior military officer Mustafa Khalil Borayese, for example who criticised the performance of president Hafiz Assad, the then minister of defence in June war 1967, in his book "Golan Fall" was kidnapped in the dark from Lebanon and forced to disappear for quarter of a century, then it was found out that he has been kept in Mezzeh military prison ... He is so fortunate that he has been lately released, and not passed away without being identified like thousand whose fate is still uncertain.

Mr. Abdullah El-Naji gave some details of the first chapter of his five years of involuntary disappearance in the Syrian security detention camps: "Intelligence patrol arrived at our home before dawn, they dashed into the house without warning, so I found them over my head, the rascals made their way everywhere inside the house starting the search. I was awakened, they ordered me to raise up my hands, and then all rooms had been thoroughly searched as if looking for a valuable treasury. Having finished search they ordered me to go with them, so they dragged me. I was seated in the car's back seat with two security elements armed with automatic rifles, one on the right and one on the left. In the front sat the driver and the patrol's commander. The car dashed throughout the street accompanied by another Jeep with five other elements". (Blood Baths in Tadmur Prison P13)

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Forcible Disappearance of Political Detainees in Syrian Prisons - Continued

Mr. Mohammed Saleem Hammad who was forced to disappear for eleven years in the ill-reputed Syrian detention camps gave the following account of the first act of his kidnap and/or arrest. "On Thursday 8/10/1980, I went at noon to the Faculty of Engineering (University of Damascus) to attend one of the lectures as usual. I was not taken astonished by the intensive guarding measurements and the spread of armed persons at gates, because such measurements had become familiar in the area for few months. However, no sooner did I stop to present my identity card to the security officer than I saw a number of armed persons surrounding me, diminishing any idea to run away. In few minutes, before I think what is going on, they covered my eyes, tied my hand, and pushed me into a car that dashed like a storm to throw me in a horrible place, then I come to learn that it was the headquarter of Adawi intelligence branch headed by colonel Nizar El-Hilo (Tadmur: witness and witnessed PP 19-20)

Miss Hiba El-Dabagh who had a nine year experience of forced disappearance in detentions of president Assad's regime described the moments when this horrific action started: " I heard very hard knocks at our door, I had a quick look through the window when I saw a big number of intelligence vehicles in the street. A loud sound came through the door storming: Open the door or we will shoot the lock. Automatically I put my prayer scarf on my head and hurried towards the door, then I halted wondering what to do! Should I open while all other girls asleep? I was uncertain. Then I hurried to Fatima who was our eldest; she was a teacher but lived with us. I awakened her talking subconsciously: Wake up! I think the Intelligence come for you! Then I remembered another colleague, Sawsan, who shared living with us. She told us that she learnt that day of her brother's execution in Tadmur detention camp the same day. I thought they had come for her ... At that time Intelligence elements had started breaking the door, knocking it with their automatic guns. So, Fatima hurried, covered her head and opened the door. They entered... Oh dear, unbelievable... One element jumped to the attic, another rushed towards the window, a third got into the kitchen, a fourth.... a tenth... One of them dashed into our room, no sooner did he see a copy of the Glorious Qur'an hung on the wall than he grabbed it, threw it hatefully on the floor and started trampling it under his feet as if he was obsessed. The others were busy searching our things in every corner of our cupboards, while we were unable to cope with what was going on, or what they were looking for! Amid this surprise I heard one of them shouting in the lounge: Wahiba Dabbagh!" (Just Five Minutes, Nine Years in Syrian Prisons PP: 13-14). Thus started the nine years journey of forced disappearance, detention, torture to Hiba Al-Dabbagh, during which nobody knew anything about her, nor did she know about her members of family who were massacred in Hama by Syrian regime security forces in 1982.

Mr. M.S.L. who disappeared involuntarily for 18 years, in president's Assad regime detention camps told Syrian Human Rights Committee: " It was 3 P.M. when I woke up due to unusual sound in the big tree in the garden, I thought it could be the strong wind in that summer night in August 1980, but when I was going back to sleep, a continuous ringing on door bell struck my hearing. I jumped from bed thinking who could be that intruder at that late time, when I started to put my foot in the open area outside my bedroom, I heard calls on the roof, from the big tree, on the wall ordering me to stop and raise up my hands. I had obeyed automatically, however, astounded, scared, and legs tremor. I was inclined to fall but for fear of shooting I tried to hold myself. In few moments, my hands were tied; my eyes were fastened with black leather, and were driven with them without knowing who I am. After few minutes I stood before Major Ghazi Kan'an, the head of Military Intelligence Branch in Homs" (from Statement of M.S.L. to Syrian Human Rights



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Forcible Disappearance of Political Detainees in Syrian Prisons - Continued

Wife of Mr. A.K. whose husband disappeared coercively for 18 years said "I went to all intelligence branches in Aleppo to ask about my husband who had not go back, some colleagues told that an intelligence patrol came to his work and arrested him, hand tied and eyes covered. Everyone denied holding any information about my husband, they swear at me, scorned me, threatened to arrest me if I came to make any further inquiry. I lost hope to trace his whereabouts... After 11 years of his disappearance, in 1991, I was summoned to Intelligence Military Branch and a round of interrogation about me and my husband took place... then I was informed that my husband was a prisoner but he died in custody and was buried. Later a military intelligence officer asked my hand in marriage, but both me and my family turned this offer down, because I was married despite their assurances that my husband died, they brought me his so-called worn out dirty clothes, He exerted pressure to persuade me, but I decided not to give up, especially to a low profile person who had been involved in mistreating the others, I did not care about the outcome. In 1995, some detainees were released; it was reported that some of them saw my husband. Later, he was lucky to be released after 18 years of disappearance, we had never had any news about him, he had never known anything about us" (from Statement of S.M. to Syrian Human Rights Committee).

Intelligence of Syrian regime used to isolate political detainees entirely from the world. To justify this, they would be engaged in all hidden and secretive means. In addition to the above-mentioned specimens, some 70000 (seventy thousand) involuntary disappearance and detention took place in Syria in 1980s and 1990s for political reasons where barbaric methods were used to humiliate Syrian people.

One immoral method pursued by Syrian Security forces to blackmail people and to rob them was to arrange visit to a disappeared detainee, or just to pass information that he is still alive for a large sum of money. It was well known in Syria that Faisal Ghanem's mother (a military captain and the director of Tadmur detention camp in early 1980s, from Bait Alayyan village, near Tartous) and through intermediaries she sent to detainees families. Her condition to arrange visits or to pass information was the payment of large sums of money or valuable jewellery. According to a lady who paid her, she only receives the finest gold of 24 carat. Although these information spread everywhere, but Mr. Mohammed Saleem Hammad recorded this piece of information in his 11 years coercive disappearance in Tadmur desert detention camp. " These developments, though apparently were towards the better, but a vile plot lied behind them, of which colonel Faisal Ghanem was its perpetrator and wicked sponsor, while Abou Awadh (a prisoner used to spy on his co-prison mates) was its dirty instrument and a snake tail that acted only for the benefit of the vile head. In a short period, we learnt that Ghanem had arranged beyond the prison's fence a network of blackmailers chaired by his mother to arrange visits for well-to-do families to see their disappeared loved ones for large sums of money." (Tadmur: Witness and Witnessed PP: 135-136).

Another low-profiled method was behind disappearance and suffering of many citizens summed up in the following incident. A relative of Mr. A.A.S. (who was a retailer) told us that a military intelligence officer bought some electrical appliances by instalment. When he was asked to pay the outstanding, the officer threatened him, and after three days his store was raided by military intelligence patrol claiming that it contained unlicensed goods. The retailer has involuntarily disappeared, after 20 years nobody knows his whereabouts... His children or his family members have no trace of him... Blackmailers escaped with his money and the store's goods. Although Syrian pretend to control the country, but crisis will continue unless Syrian people feel peace under a just law where

until this goal could be fulfilled, the Syrian Human Rights Committee calls on the Syrian to go ahead in being firm and steadfast, not bothering to a handful of such casual parasites who dominate at present. SHRC calls upon all good people to unveil all immoral means used by Syrian security forces that failed to show any interest in the people's rights or honour. SHRC calls upon the head of Syrian regime reminding him that oppression lasts only for a short time, and that human history record says that oppression will be aborted in no time.

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Amnesty International calls for release or fair retrial of all political detainees

Amnesty International wrote urging Bashar al-Assad to put high on its agenda by releasing political prisoners in Syria.

"Today, on the 20th anniversary of the massacre of hundreds of prisoners in Tadmur Prison, we call on the Syrian government to dedicate itself to building a state of law and human rights", Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization stressed that the resolution of the issue of political prisoners should be considered of first importance. Thousands of detainees have "disappeared", their whereabouts not known to their families or extrajudicially executed. At least 1,500 are believed to remain, most of them still detained in secret without access to families, in other prisons and detention centres.

"On our last visit in 1997 we handed over to the Syrian Government a list of 661 political detainees, a small proportion of the thousands of names of those detained or 'disappeared' in our files, and we were prepared to discuss each individual case with the Syrian Government. Unfortunately, they were not ready to discuss the lists," said Amnesty International. "We would be ready to come back at any time".

Former detainees have described the prison regime in Tadmur as one of humiliation, hunger and constant torture.

"Death is a daily occurrence, lurking in torture, random beating up, the gouging of eyes, the breaking of limbs ? It stares one in the face and is staved off only by coincidences over 17 years" , wrote one prisoner of Tadmur, in a letter smuggled out of Syria this year.

[The full press release on the AI web site](#)

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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Latest Press Releases

Israel/Occupied Territories/Lebanon: Amnesty International calls for UN investigation

AI Index: MDE 15/035/2000

Publish date: 09/10/2000

"Since 29 September, Israeli security forces have frequently used excessive force on demonstrators when lives were not in immediate danger," Amnesty International said today.

In preliminary conclusions from Amnesty International's delegation in Israel and the Occupied Territories the human rights organization reiterated its condemnation of the excessive use of force by law enforcement officials.

"In many cases the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), the Israel Police and the Border Police have apparently breached their own internal regulations on the use of force, as well as international human rights standards on the use of force and firearms," Amnesty International said.

More than 80 people, including children, nearly all of them Palestinians from the Occupied Territories and Israel, have died since clashes began on 29 September 2000 between Israeli security forces and Palestinian demonstrators all over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as in Israel. There have also been armed confrontations between the Israeli and Palestinian security forces.

An Amnesty International delegation is currently in Israel and the Occupied Territories, including the areas under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, to examine policing of demonstrations in view of the loss of life. The delegation is composed of Dr. Stephen Malés, a former senior Police officer of the UK police with special expertise in sensitive public order policing, and Dr Elizabeth Hodgkin, a researcher from the International Secretariat of Amnesty International.

The delegates have met NGOs, doctors and over 50 witnesses to the events. They have visited sites in Ramallah, Nablus, East Jerusalem, Nazareth, Arabah and other parts of northern Israel, places where demonstrators have died after the Israeli security forces fired on demonstrators and rioters. The delegates have seen large quantities of expended and some live ammunition, rubber-coated metal bullets, CS grenades and projectiles, during visits to sites of demonstrations, as well as bullets embedded in surrounding homes and much bullet damage.

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SHRC | PRESS RELEASES | 7 February 2000

SHRC Publishes Names of Hundreds of Political Detainees - 7 February 2000

In the second half of 1979, Syrian Security and Intelligence force launched a wide and fierce campaign of detentions against Muslim Brotherhood Society. This campaign was culminated and legitimised, by issuing Article 49/1980, which condemns to death every member of Muslim Brotherhood. The Syrian authorities accused Muslim Brotherhood of killing a number of Alawite military students in an attack against Artillery school. Muslim Brotherhood, on their part denied any involvement or information of the plot prior to its occurrence and denounced it. Although it was proved later that the government accusation was groundless, the campaign of detention was bigger than expected, it included many opponents of the President Assad's regime. Patrols of Security forces, intelligence squads and the ruling party militia then blocked streets of Syrian cities; units of various departments of intelligence raided rapidly and fiercely houses of opponents, suspected opponents, their relatives, cramming them all in prisons and interrogation centres all over the country. Many prisoners and hostages have been killed under torture, this recurred with various massacres perpetrated against civilians in many parts of the country by security forces, intelligence squads, special units, defence brigades and some other units of the army. Massacre of Tadmur Prison, for example, was conducted on 27th June 1980 according to direct orders of Rif'at Assad, the President's brother. Adding to that the massacres of Aleppo, Hama, Jessr-El-Shughoor, Sarmada... and eventually the great massacre of Hama, February 1982.

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Subject: Arab Program for Human Rights Activists: Message to President Hafez El Assad .. Signed by 40 Activists from Accross the Arab World



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[see footer for contact and other pertinent information]

Source: Direct Submission
Organization: Arab Program for Human Rights Activists
Email: "Haggag Nail" <rphra@mail.rite.com>
Date: Tue, 21 Sep 1999 14:17:37 +0300
Title: Message to President Hafez El Assad

TEXT:

ARAB PROGRAM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST -EGYPT
Cairo 19 September 1999

His Excellency
President Hafez el Assad
President of the Republic of Syria

Dear Sir,

The Arab Program for Human Rights' Activists is an Arab human rights organization concerned with the conditions, and defense, of Arab activists. The Program, with great concern, followed the case of the Syrian activist Nezar Niouf, one of the most prominent human rights' activists in Syria and the Arab world, who was arrested on 5 January 1992. A Syrian court condemned him to ten years imprisonment in the 'Maza' prison. The Program then interviewed Mr. Eissa Darwish, the Syrian ambassador in Cairo, with an appeal to release Nezar for his deteriorating health condition.

Your Excellency,

Throughout a whole year of continued appeals to your government, through the Syrian ambassador in Cairo, and through various local, regional, and international organizations, we had - and still have - the hope that you would respond to our humanitarian demand to release the Syrian activist Nezar Niouf.

We appeal to your humanitarian conscience to examine and immediately decide his release with a sincere desire that Syria and the Arab world become a real fortress for human rights to protect the integrity of the Arab people.

Best regards,

The Arab Program for Human Rights' Activists

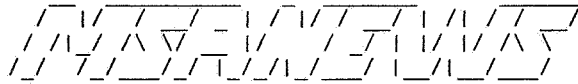
This message signed by :

- 1- Mr. Haggag Nail - Arab Program For Human Rights Activists - Egypt.
- 2- Arab Program For Human Rights Activists - Sudan
- 3- Ms. Lara Kheyta - Coordinator of APHRA - Jordan
- 4- Mr. Akram Koraishan - Coordinator of APHRA - Jordan
- 5- Mr. Khaleel Bu Shimala - Dameer Foundation - Palestine
- 6- Mrs. Elham Adel Wahab - Yemeni Organization for H.R - Yemen.
- 7- Mr. Ahmed Abdallah El Sofi - Yemeni Institute for Democracy - Yemen.
- 8- Mr. Ahmed El Hareiri - Morocco Association for H.R -Morocco.
- 9- Mrs. Khadega El Rakani - Morocco Association for H.R -Morocco.
- 10- Mr. Ali Abu Bakr - Djibouti Organization for H.R- Djibouti
- 11- Mr. Abdel Hadi El Khawaga - G-Secretary of Bahrain human rights Organization - Bahrain.
- 12- Dr. Moncef El Marzouki -President of national council for freedoms , president of Arab commission for HR. Tunisia.
- 13- Mrs. Seham Bin Sadreen - Tunisian committee for HR- Tunisia.
- 14- Dr. Hamoudah Fathel Rahman - G-Secretary of Sudanese human rights Organization - Cairo
- 15- Mr. Khaleifa Zein El Deen - A lawyer - Algeria
- 16- Mr. Akrof Ewad - Activist - Algeria

22-Mrs. Khalda Garar - Manager of Dameer Foundation - Palestine.
23-Mr. Omer Shaban - member of International supervising council - Geneva.
24-Mr. Fathi Sabah - Journalist - Palestine
25-Mr. Abdel Azez Abu El Geraia - member of Dameer Foundation - Palestine.
26-Mr. Basheer El Seeid - Lawyer - Tunisia
27-Mrs. Violet Dageer - General secretary of Arab commission for H.R
28-Mr. Abed Hussein Shaban - Iraqi organization for human rights - Iraq.
29-Mr. Abdel Aliha bin Abdel salam - Morocco Association for H.R - Morocco.
30-Mr. Gamal Al Adeimi - G. Secretry of NGOs Alliance - Yemen.
31-Mr. Ameer Salem - Director of LRRC - Egypt
32-Dr. Ahmed Zein Aidros - MADHA- Yemen
33-Dr. Mohamed Abdo El Zogbeer -Activist - Yemen
34-Mrs. Asma Khedr - Meizan - Jordan
35-Mrs. Hekmat Halsah - Jordanian Women Union - Jordan
36-Mrs. Nadia Shamrouk - Jordanian Women Union - Jordan
37-Mr. Asem Rababah - Jordanian Association for H.R.-Jordan
38-Mr. Hany El Dahlah - A lawyer - Jordan
39-Mr. Waleed Maragah - Arab Commission for H.R -Jordan
40-Nizam Asag - R.C.I.S - Jordan

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Amnesty International

Annual Report 2000

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Syria

Syrian Arab Republic

Head of state: Hafez al-Assad

Head of government: Mahmud al-Zu'bi

Capital: Damascus

Population: 15 million

Official language: Arabic

Death penalty: retentionist

A general amnesty issued by President Hafez al-Assad in July resulted in the release of an unspecified number of political prisoners (although the main beneficiaries were prisoners charged with economic offences). Restrictions imposed on the travel of Syrian nationals were relaxed during the year, but AI remained concerned about continued infringement of the rights of former political prisoners, including their right to freedom of movement and travel. Hundreds of people, including foreign nationals, were arrested on political grounds. Hundreds of political detainees, including prisoners of conscience, remained in detention, some held without charge or trial and others serving long sentences passed after unfair trials before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC). There were reports of torture and ill-treatment and a number of sick detainees remained held without access to adequate medical care. At least one person "disappeared" during 1999, and scores of "disappearances" from previous years remained unresolved. The death in custody of a Lebanese detainee was reported. At least two people were sentenced to death and executed.

Background

President Hafez al-Assad was re-elected in a national referendum in February for a further five years in office. Since 1973, he has presided over a government led by the National Progressive Front, an alliance of the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party and other smaller parties. During 1999 there were violent clashes between the authorities and supporters of Rifa't al-Assad, brother of President Hafez al-Assad and former Vice-President, in the coastal city of Latakia. At least two people were killed and scores of Rifa't al-Assad supporters were rounded up and questioned. Opposition activities remained outlawed and members of unauthorized political parties were at risk of detention. A state of emergency, with attendant legislative and security measures leading to grave and continuing human rights violations, remained in place; it had been in force since 1963.

Arrests

Hundreds of people were arrested and detained during 1999, apparently for political reasons. They included members of the unauthorized Islamist groups *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, Muslim Brotherhood, and *Hizb al-Tahrir*, [Islamic] Liberation Party, and foreign nationals from other Arab states.

More than 500 members of *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* and *Hizb al-Tahrir* were rounded up in a wave of arrests in December when Syrian security forces raided homes of suspected members of these groups in the cities of Homs, Damascus and Aleppo. They were reportedly held in incommunicado detention in Damascus and there were fears that they might be tortured or ill-treated. Also in December, the former Deputy Controller General of *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, Amin Yakun, was shot dead by unidentified gunmen.

Foreign nationals arrested during the year were reportedly held incommunicado, mostly in two detention centres: *Far' Falastin*, Palestine Branch, and *Far'al-Tahqiq al-Askari*, Military Interrogation Branch. Among the detainees were 'Abdallah Ahmad Muhammad, a 71-year-old Iraqi Kurd arrested in July, and Ali Hussein Muhaimid, an Iraqi arrested in August. Both men were reportedly arrested at Damascus airport, and taken to *Far' Falastin*. Muhammad Himo, a Syrian, the owner of a Kurdish bookshop in Aleppo, was reportedly arrested in October. There were fears that these detainees were at risk of torture or ill-treatment, while held in prolonged incommunicado detention.

Releases

At least a dozen political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, were released during 1999. Most had served long sentences of up to 15 years imposed by the SSSC after unfair trials. They included Doha 'Ashur al-Askari, and Ratib Sha'bu, who had been held beyond the expiry of long sentences handed down for their involvement with the unauthorized *Hizb al-'Amal al-Shuvu'i* (PCA). Party for

Palestinian political prisoners were reportedly transferred to *Far al-Farqiy al-Askari*, apparently pending release. They included 'Adnan 'Abd al-Rahman al-Dabak, and Nail Isma'il 'Izzat, both detained since 1985 in connection with alleged involvement with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). They had not been released by the end of 1999.

Prisoners of conscience

Scores of prisoners of conscience remained in detention serving long sentences imposed in previous years by the SSSC after unfair trials. Dozens of prisoners of conscience detained for alleged membership of the PCA continued to serve sentences of up to 22 years. They included Muhammad Ghanim, a doctor, and Faysal 'Allush, a former university student of mechanical engineering, both serving 15 years' imprisonment with hard labour.

At least five prisoners of conscience detained for their involvement with the PCA continued to be held beyond the expiry of long sentences. They included Basel Hurani and 'Abd al-Halim Rumieh, both former students of electrical engineering at Damascus University.

The precise number of prisoners of conscience held on charges of involvement with *al-Hizb al-Shuyu'i al-Maktab al-Siyassi* (CPPB), Communist Party-Political Bureau, was not known. At least one, 'Umar al-Hayek, remained in detention at Tadmur Military Prison, serving a 15-year sentence handed down after an unfair trial. 'Abdalla Qabbara, a lawyer sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment in 1994 in connection with his involvement with the CPPB, was released from Tadmur Military Prison during 1999. He had reportedly been tortured during the interrogation stage of his detention and was suffering from chronic diabetes.

Human rights defenders

The work of human rights groups remained unauthorized in Syria. Five prisoners of conscience remained in detention serving up to 10 years' imprisonment for their involvement in the distribution of a leaflet to mark the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The leaflet was produced in 1992 by an unauthorized human rights group, the Committees for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF). The prisoners of conscience were Nizar Nayyuf, Muhammad 'Ali Habib, 'Afif Muzhir, Bassam al-Sheikh and Thabit Murad. Aktham Nu'aysa, a leading member of the CDF released in 1998, continued to have his civil liberties restricted and was barred from travelling abroad to seek medical treatment.

Long-term political detainees

Hundreds of political prisoners and possible prisoners of conscience, including foreign nationals, remained held. Some were detained incommunicado without charge or trial, others were serving sentences passed after grossly unfair trials. Hundreds of political prisoners held in connection with activities related to *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* remained in incommunicado detention, mostly without charge or trial. They included 'Aziza Jallud, arrested in 1979 in lieu of her husband who was sought by the Syrian authorities, reportedly in connection with a bombing incident. An unspecified number of political prisoners held in connection with *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* were reportedly released following the July amnesty. Scores of Lebanese nationals held since the 1980s and 1990s remained in Syrian prisons. Most had been arrested by the Syrian intelligence forces in Lebanon and transferred to Syria where they were mostly held in incommunicado detention.

* 'Isam 'Uthman al-Mistrah, a Lebanese carpenter born in 1961, was taken by Syrian forces from Beirut on 8 August 1992 and transferred to Syria. The Syrian authorities acknowledged his detention after nine months' incommunicado detention, and allowed his family monthly visits. He was reportedly tried and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment on charges of being "an agent" of the intelligence service of former Lebanese army General 'Aoun.

Scores of Palestinian and Jordanian political detainees, most of whom were held in connection with Palestinian political movements, remained in detention without charge or serving long sentences passed after grossly unfair trials.

* Tawfiq Yunis 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ashqar, a Jordanian contractor born in 1948, married with six children, was arrested in early 1982 at Dara' on the Jordanian-Syrian border. He was reportedly held in incommunicado detention in Tadmur Military Prison for alleged involvement with an Islamist group. He was reportedly acquitted by a court before his transfer to Tadmur Military Prison, but was never released.

Torture

Torture and ill-treatment of detainees continued to be routine, especially during the initial stage of detention and interrogation and in Tadmur Military Prison, notorious for its harsh conditions. There were also fears that prisoners of conscience transferred to this prison in 1998, including Nu'man 'Ali 'Abdu, may have been tortured and ill-treated as a form of punishment. New cases of torture and ill-treatment were reported during 1999, especially of political detainees held at *Far' Falastin* in Damascus.

* Fa'iq Ibrahim al-Yasseri and Khalil Ibrahim Hussain, two Iraqi nationals released in March after being held from November 1998 to March 1999 at *Far' Falastin*, were reportedly tortured or ill-treated, apparently for their involvement with the Damascus-based Iraqi Centre for Humanitarian Activities. They had been held incommunicado for six weeks in an underground cell and were repeatedly beaten by the

concern, especially given the failure of the Syrian authorities to improve prison conditions and investigate dozens of deaths in custody of political prisoners in previous years.

* Adel Khalaf Ajjuri, a Lebanese political prisoner detained since 1990, died in custody on 22 September in Sednaya Prison, reportedly after being denied access to specialist medical care. No autopsy was performed on his body by either the Syrian or Lebanese authorities. His family was not informed until almost a month after his death and were forced to collect his body from Syria themselves. The death certificate, issued by the Syrian authorities indicated that the cause of death was heart failure.

Cruel and inhuman prison conditions

Dozens of political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, continued to be held without adequate medical care in prisons where conditions fell seriously short of international standards. They included prisoner of conscience Wajih Ghanim, serving 15 years' imprisonment on charges of membership of the PCA, who suffered severe strain on the neck affecting the spine apparently caused by torture. 'Abd al-Majid Nimer Zaghmout, a Palestinian political prisoner, remained in detention despite an order by the Minister of Defence for him to be released. 'Abd al-Majid Nimer Zaghmout, held since an unfair trial more than 30 years earlier in 1966, suffered from advanced cancer and was held at Teshrin Military Hospital in Damascus.

'Disappearances'

At least one person "disappeared" during 1999, after reportedly being taken by the Syrian security forces from his home in April following years of residence abroad. Scores of previous "disappearance" cases remained unresolved.

* Khadija Yahya Bukhari, a Lebanese national, was arrested by Syrian forces at Beirut airport on 28 April 1992 along with her son and daughter and taken to the Syrian Intelligence centre near the Beau Rivage Hotel in Beirut. They were then transferred to *Far' al-Tahqiq al- 'Askari* and *Far' Falastin* in Syria. Both her son and daughter were subsequently released, but the fate and whereabouts of Khadija Bukhari remained unknown. She and her husband, a Syrian officer, were apparently suspected of "collaboration" with Israel.

Death penalty

The death penalty continued to be applied and at least two people were sentenced to death for murder and executed during 1999.

* Haytham Sa'id Yaghi, aged 21, and Firaz bin Qassem Yaghi, aged 19, two Syrian nationals from the same family, were executed in June in a public square within a week of being convicted of murder.

Government communications

AI received some responses from the Syrian authorities on cases raised by the organization.

AI country reports

- * Syria: Caught in a regional conflict — Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian political detainees in Syria (AI Index: MDE 24/001/99)
- * Syria: Double Injustice — prisoners of conscience held beyond the expiry of their sentences (AI Index: MDE 24/010/99)

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