



Tunisia

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Renewed upsurge of acts of intimidation and arrests of lawyers working against the repression of the demonstrations against social injustice

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Paris-Geneva-Copenhagen, January 2011 - 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), as well as the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights network, expresses their solidarity for all the human rights defenders in Tunisia, and those lawyers who are involved in defending social justice, the right to dignity and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in particular.

While the protests against social injustice that broke out in December 2010, continue to spread and gain momentum, in the aim of challenging corruption and the violations of fundamental freedoms in the country, our affiliates pay tribute to the strong commitment of human rights defenders, and particularly lawyers, in defending freedom of expression, the right to peaceful assembly and the values of the Rule of Law, despite the violent repression that they are suffering.

Our affiliates sent a delegation to Tunis on 6 and 7 January 2011, in order to express their solidarity for human defenders, journalists, trade union activists and any other persons who may have taken part in the demonstrations in a peaceful manner. The delegation was able to meet with numerous representatives of civil society, in particular the Tunisian Human Rights League (Ligue Tunisienne des droits de l'Homme - LTDH), the Tunisian Association of Women Democrats (Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates - ATFD) and the National Council of Liberties in Tunisia (Conseil National pour les Libertés en Tunisie - CNLT), the President of the Tunisia Bar, as well as numerous lawyers who described the extent of violence that the repression orchestrated by the ruling power has reached.

As a matter of fact, those lawyers who have been defending fundamental freedoms have been witnessing the instrumentalisation of the judicial system by the country's executive power for years, in a country that has been characterised by a constant double rhetoric around Human Rights.

On 28 December 2010, following a peaceful gathering in front of the Courthouse in Tunis, in solidarity with the inhabitants of Sidi Bouzid, which was aimed at denouncing the use of firearms against unarmed civilians, two lawyers, Maître Abdelraouf Ayadi and Maître Chaouki Beleid, were kidnapped by plain-clothes police officers, arbitrarily detained and subjected to ill-treatment, before they were released the following day.

The President of the Tunis Bar, Maître Abderrazaq Kilani, and the Council of the Order of Barristers of Tunis subsequently called for a national demonstration of lawyers on 31 December, inviting their colleagues to wear a red

rosette on their robes in order to demonstrate their objection to all forms of violence and to reaffirm the lawyers' right to peaceful demonstration.

On 31 December, these demonstrations were violently crushed by the police, particularly in the cities of Tunis, Gafsa, Sfax, Mahdia, Grombalia and Monastir. Representatives of the police came into the court premises to launch physical and verbal assaults against the lawyers and to rip the rosettes off their robes, using force. In view of the extent of the repression against the lawyers, the President of the Bar called an emergency meeting at the Lawyers' House, but the building was encircled and plain-clothes police officers launched new attacks against the lawyers, who were trying to access the building. The Council of the Order of Barristers then called another day of demonstrations and called assemblies in front of all the courts of the country on 6 January 2011. This national demonstration was joined by an overwhelming majority of the country's lawyers.

In addition, on 11 January 2011, a peaceful demonstration of artists who had come to express their support for the demonstrations against social injustice in front of the Municipal Theatre of Tunis, was violently crushed and dispersed by numerous police officers in plain clothes and in uniform.

Several lawyers who were present on the scene, including Maître Abdelatif Baili, member of the leadership committee of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), Maître Samia Abbou, as well as Maître Radhia Nasraoui, President of the Association for the Fight against Torture in Tunisia (Association de Lutte contre la Torture en Tunisie - ALTT), were attacked by police officers shortly after the demonstration.

On 12 and 13 January respectively, the political opponent Hama Hammami, spouse of Maître Nasraoui, and Mohammed Mezam, a lawyer, were arrested. Our organisations are deeply concerned that these two people, who are, as a matter of fact, held in secret detention, might be subjected to acts of torture or ill-treatment.

Our organisations call upon the Tunisian authorities to fulfil their international obligations by putting an immediate end to all forms of threatening and harassment against Tunisian lawyers and human rights defenders, and ensuring respect for the physical and mental integrity of any person who takes part in peaceful demonstrations under any circumstances.

The Observatory and REMDH would like to reiterate the fact that human rights defenders, including lawyers, have the right to further the protection and the exercise of all human rights at the national level and, hence, to call for an end to all economic and social injustice suffered by their fellow Tunisian citizens, and the end to all impunity enjoyed by those who misuse the country's wealth for their own purposes.

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