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Syria: Continued harassment of prisoners of conscience

Paris-Geneva-Copenhagen, March 17, 2010. 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), and the Euro-Mediterranean Network for Human Rights (EMHRN) denounce the continued harassment faced by Syrian human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience.

On March 10, 2010, the first public hearing of the trial of human rights lawyer Mr. **Muhannad Al-Hassani**, President of the Syrian Organisation for Human Rights "Sawassyah", Commissioner of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) as well as one of the four nominees for the Martin Ennals Award 2010, was held before the Second Chamber of the Damascus Criminal Court in the presence of numerous human rights activists and lawyers, foreign embassies representatives, and international observers, notably Mr. Abdessatar Benmoussa, former President of the Tunis Bar Association mandated by the ICJ, the Observatory and the EMHRN to attend the hearing.

During his hearing, Mr. Al-Hassani recalled that the accusations held against him are groundless. He recalled that "Sawassyah" was set up in conformity with Syrian legal provisions, and that according to its status, hearings before the Supreme State Security Court are public. Mr. Al-Hassani stressed that his organisation has always denounced all kinds of human rights violations, be it at the national or regional levels. He also challenged anyone to bring evidence that "Sawassyah" has ever "spread false news" during its six years of existence. In his conclusion, Mr. Al-Hassani stated that "human rights principles represent a humanist achievement for the sake of the weak, the oppressed and voiceless people. It is a noble commitment, and I am innocent of all criminal accusations that are made against me".

The next hearing will be held on April 6, 2010. Mr. Al-Hassani faces a sentence of up to 15 years of imprisonment.

On March 11, 2010, the Damascus Appeal Court rejected the appeal filed by 12 detained democracy and rights activists, the leaders of the National Council of the Damascus Declaration [1] to apply for their early release in conformity with the law on penalties. The benefit of early release after serving three quarters of a sentence applies in principle to all prisoners. Our organisations regret that this right is constantly denied to human rights defenders. The twelve were convicted on October 29, 2008 by the Assizes Court of Damascus to two and a half years' imprisonment for "disseminating false or exaggerated information to weaken the spirit of the Nation", "membership of a secret organisation aiming to destabilise the State" and "incitement to racial, religious or sectarian strife"[2]. Our organisations consider that these activists have been punished for peacefully exercising their fundamental right to call for democratic reforms and the respect of fundamental rights as guaranteed by the Syrian Constitution and international law.

Prisoners of conscience are also subjected to harassment and discriminatory conditions during their detention. On March 13, 2010, several prisoners of conscience detained in the Adra prison in Damascus, including Mr. Mohannad Al-Hassani, Mr. **Jaber Al-Shoufie**, a member of the Committees for the Defence of Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF), and Mr. **Riad Al-Seif**, a pro-democracy activist, decided to give up their visitation rights to protest to the penitentiary administration's attempt to compel them to keep their prison uniform during visits. This measure illustrates the discriminatory conditions of detention for prisoners of conscience, such as restricted access to their lawyers and families during their visits, deprivation of a bed, constant scrutiny and harassment from their cellmates. In addition, Mr. Al-Hassani faces another penal procedure following his request to attend French lessons given within the prison, a move that reminds penal procedures undertaken against several other human rights defenders, notably Mr. **Haytham El-Maleh**, Mr. **Anwar Al-Bunni**, Mr. **Kamal Al-**

Labwani and Mr. **Walid Al-Bunni** on the basis of the testimony of other detainees.

Our organisations urge the Syrian authorities to put an end to all acts of harassment against human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists, to release all those who are currently detained immediately and unconditionally, and to conform in all circumstances with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as international human rights instruments ratified by Syria.

Footnotes

[1] The National Council for Democratic Change in Syria is a collective opposition and pro-democratic movement formed by more than 160 political activists, human rights defenders, Syrian intellectuals and artists. For more information, see the Observatory's Annual Report 2009.

[2] Articles 285-286 and 307 of the Criminal Code.