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Annual Report on Human Rights 2008 - Syria

Introduction

The Syrian government's human rights record continues to be a cause for concern. The situation for Syria's Kurdish population has deteriorated significantly. Around 4,000 political prisoners, many of them members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood and the Communist Party, remain imprisoned in Syria. The Emergency Law, imposed in 1963, severely restricts basic rights. Public calls for its repeal by Syrian reformers have not been heeded. The Foreign Secretary raised human rights during his visit to Syria in November.

Current concerns

Civil society

As reported in the 2007 Report, the development of civil society is severely restricted: all NGOs require government approval to be established, to undertake any activities or to accept foreign funding. The establishment of a Syrian Human Rights Council, proposed by the Baath Party in 2005, has been delayed indefinitely by the Syrian government.

On 7 August, economics professor Aref Dalila was released 7 years into a 10-year sentence for criticising government policies in articles and remarks. Dalila is the last to be released of a group of 10 activists detained in the 2001 crackdown following a brief period of openness known as the 'Damascus Spring'. The authorities held Dalila in solitary confinement, and his health deteriorated sharply in 2006 following a stroke. Four of the activists detained with Dalila in 2001 and subsequently released (Kamal Labwani, Habib Saleh, Riad Seif and Walid al-Bunni) were recently imprisoned again for their peaceful opposition activities.

The 'Damascus Declaration Twelve', a group of intellectuals and activists, were arrested in December 2007 after calling for democratic reforms in Syria. The 12 were charged in the Criminal Court on 30 July, in the biggest collective prosecution of Syrian dissidents in 7 years. On 29 October, all 12 defendants, 11 men and one woman, were sentenced to two and a half years' imprisonment for the crimes of damaging the dignity of the state and distributing false news.

Basel Ghalyoun has been held in detention by the State Security Branch in Damascus since 22 July. He was sentenced in Spain in October 2007 to 12 years in prison for his alleged role in the Madrid bombings in 2004. However, his conviction was overturned by Spain's supreme court on 17 July 2008. He was subsequently deported to Syria by the

Spanish authorities. According to his lawyer, since his arrest he has been allowed only one phone call to his family

Restriction of basic rights

As noted in the 2007 Report, arbitrary arrests have continued during 2008. Reports have been published about torture in prison, poor prison conditions, arbitrary arrests and detentions, absence of rule of law and severely restricted civil liberties. In their report No Room to Breathe dated 18 October, Human Rights Watch noted that:

"...the most serious barrier to the rights and freedoms of Syria's human rights community lies not in the law but in the role of the powerful security services, which routinely harass human rights groups and scrutinise their leaders, activities, and funding. The security services frequently operate even beyond the provisions of Syria's strict laws to arbitrarily break up meetings of human rights groups, bar activists from traveling, arrest them, and refer them to trial under charges such as 'spreading false information' and weakening nationalist sentiments".

Freedom of the media

The 1963 Emergency Law continues to allow the Syrian government to censor the media, and 153 internet sites have had their access blocked. Facebook and YouTube are banned as are all opposition party sites and many Lebanese news sites. Reuters news agency reported Syrian officials as saying that internet controls were needed to guard against attempts to spread sectarian divisions and "penetration by Israel". In 2008, the Syrian government banned popular pan-Arab dailies Al Hayatt and Sharq al Awsat

Rights of Kurds

Syria's estimated 1.7 million Kurds continue to suffer from discrimination, lack of political representation and tight restrictions on social and cultural expression. Around 300,000 are still denied citizenship. Approximately 150 Kurds are at present being held in custody as political prisoners. In March, the army opened fire on a celebration of Kurdish New Year (Naw Roz) in north-east Syria, killing three people.

On 10 October, the President issued Decree 49, which questions the right of Syrian citizens to hold property in the border areas of the country. There are to be, with immediate effect, no more entries in the land register. Property can no longer be bought or sold, nor can it be bequeathed to legal heirs. Those affected are the Kurds, concentrated in three areas on the Turkish-Syrian border: Hasaka, Al-Raqah and Aleppo.

The long-term policy of dispossession by Syria is causing mass poverty (80 per cent of Kurds now live below the poverty line, compared with 40 per cent in 2005) and migration. Kurdish leaders estimate that 50 per cent of those living in the Kurdish villages along the border in 2007 migrated to Damascus and Aleppo in 2008.

In October, 7 Kurdish parties and organisations demonstrated against Decree 49; 187 people were arrested, among them Dr Abd al Hakim Bashar, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party, the largest Kurdish coalition party in Syria.

UK action

The Foreign Secretary raised human rights during the visit of the Syrian Foreign Minister to London, and during his visit to Syria. In addition, during his June visit to Damascus, the head of the Diplomatic Service, Peter Ricketts, met human rights defenders to discuss areas where the UK may be able to help to improve the situation.

We have worked with the Swedish and French EU presidencies to ensure that human

rights are raised with Syria. The French presidency issued two statements on human rights, the first on 19 September (www.ue2008.fr) and the second on 31 October (www.ue2008.fr) deploring the sentencing of the 'Damascus Declaration Twelve'. Members of EU missions, including the UK, regularly attend trials of human rights activists.

Our Embassy in Damascus ran a project in 2008 to assist a local human rights group to produce three reports for distribution in English and Arabic (on Syrian prison conditions and Iraqi refugees, and a general report on human rights in Syria).

Forward look

Human rights will remain an important strand of our bilateral and EU relations with the Syrian government. Our aim is to create wider links between official Syrian and relevant UK organisations and academic institutions as the basis for creating a wider civil society programme.
