


Joint Appeal – Syria: Call to release freedom of expression defenders held incommunicado

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Freedom of Speech, Shrinking Space for Civil Society, Statement, Syria

June 22, 2012

Read in: Arabic

The undersigned rights groups from around the world are seriously concerned about human rights defenders, journalists, writers and bloggers in Syria who have been subjected to enforced disappearance, which has contributed to the lack of credible information available about human rights violations on the ground. We call on the Syrian government to provide information about the whereabouts of all those detained in violation of their right to free expression and to release them immediately. We further call on all interested parties, specifically United Nations Special Envoy to Syria Kofi Annan, to seek assurances that everyone will be allowed to safely and freely report on human rights violations during the ongoing conflict.

Human rights defender and journalist Mazen Darwish, Director of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), was arrested on 16 February 2012 by the Air Force Intelligence (AFI) Service. At this time, his family has no information about his health and whereabouts.

It has also been impossible to obtain information regarding the whereabouts of other members of SCM, human rights defenders and bloggers including Abdelrahman Hamada, Hussein Ghareer, Mansour Hamid Al -Omari, and Hani Zetani, who were arrested together with Darwish and detained incommunicado at the AFI detention centre.

Seven other SCM employees and one visitor to the office face a military trial on charges of “possessing prohibited materials with the intent to disseminate them.” They are due in court in Damascus on 25 June 25, after the trial was postponed because the AFI had failed to notify it whether Darwish would appear as a witness. Those charged are bloggers Bassam Al-Ahmad, Joan Farso, Ayham Ghazzoul, Yara Bader, Razan Ghazzawi, Mayadah Al-Khaleel, Sana Zetani and Hanadi Zhlout.

There have been other cases of human rights defenders arrested last year, whose whereabouts are also unknown. Human rights defender Barraa Bukairati from Damascus was arrested on 30 September 2011 by the AFI after they raided his home and confiscated his computer. Since his arrest, there has been no information about Bukairati or his whereabouts, and his family does not know whether he is alive or dead.

Similarly, peace activist Yahya Al-Sharbaji, a well-known advocate of non-violence, was arrested on 6 September 2011 by the AFI. His family does not know where he is, or if he is alive or dead.

Over a year ago, human rights defender Anas Al-Shaghri was arrested on 16 May 2011. He had been quoted by international media prior to his arrest. There is no confirmed information about whether he is alive or dead, or of his whereabouts.

In addition, writers, poets and bloggers remain in detention in Syria, some held incommunicado. Last year, Muheeb Al-Nawathy, a Palestinian journalist was arrested in Syria on 5 January 2011 nine days after arriving in Damascus to do research for a book he is writing about Hamas (the Palestinian Islamic group). Al-Nawathy's whereabouts are still unknown.

Tal Al-Mallouhi, a young poet and blogger who was arrested on 27 December 2009, was sentenced to five years in prison after being summoned for questioning about her blog entries. She is reportedly held in solitary confinement and feared to be at risk of ill-treatment.

We express serious concern for the security and physical and psychological integrity of the above-mentioned human rights defenders, writers and bloggers and we believe that their presumed forced disappearance is directly related to their peaceful and legitimate human rights activities in Syria. We believe that this presumed forced disappearance also forms part of a wider campaign of threats and harassment against human rights defenders in Syria in order to prevent them from carrying out their legitimate work.

We, the undersigned groups, therefore:

Call on the Syrian authorities to immediately reveal the whereabouts of all detained human rights defenders, journalists, writers and bloggers, and to ensure they have unrestricted access to their family, lawyers; and guarantee that they are protected from any torture or other ill-treatment;

- Call on the Syrian government to respect its international obligations including those outlined in the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms;
- Call for the UN to press for the immediate and unconditional release of all those currently detained in violation of their right to freedom of expression, guaranteed under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Syria is a state party.

Signatories :

Al-Adala Centre for Human Rights (Saudi Arabia)

Alkarama (Dignity)

Alliance for Arab Women

Andean Foundation for Media Observation & Study (FUNDAMEDIOS)

Appropriate Communication Techniques for Development (ACT)

Arab Foundation for Civil Society

Arab Foundation for Development and Citizenship

Arab Working group for Media Monitoring (AWG-MM)

Arabic Network for Human Rights Information

ARTICLE 19

Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM)

Asuda for Combating Violence against Women

Bahrain Center for Human Rights

Bahrain Human Rights Society

Bahrain Rehabilitation and Anti Violence Organization (BRAVO)

Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights

Cairo Center for Development (CCD)

Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies

Canadian Journalists for Free Expression

Cartoonists Rights Network International

Center for Egyptian Women`s Legal Assistance (CEWLA)

Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility

Center for Media Studies & Peace Building (CEMESP)

Centre for Independent Journalism

Citizens for Global Solutions

Committee to Protect Journalists

Damascus Centre for Human Rights Studies

Damascus Center for Democratic Studies and Human Rights in Syria

Doha Centre for Media Freedom

Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement

Egyptian Organization for Human Rights

El Nadim Center for the Management and Rehabilitation of victims of violence

Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN)

Freedom Forum

Freedom House

Freedoms Organization in Syria

Globe International

Gulf Centre for Human Rights

Gulf Civil Society Associations Forum

Hague Center for the persecution of Criminals against Humanity in Syria

Hivos

Human Rights and Democracy Organization in Iraq

Human Rights Network for Journalists – Uganda

Human Rights Organization in Syria (MAF)

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Initiative for Freedom of Expression

Instituto Prensa y Sociedad de Venezuela

International Institute for Nonviolent Action (NOVACT)

International Media Support

International Press Institute

Iraqi Institution for Development

Iraqi Journalists Rights Defense Association

Iraqi Network for Social Media (INSM)

Iraqi Society for Human Rights

Khiam Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture

Kurdish Committee for Human Rights in Syria

Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering (RDFL)

Legal Protection Center for Journalists in Iraq

L'Instance Marocain des Droits Humains

Maharat Foundation (Skills Foundation)

Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance

Mother Association for Rights & Development (MARD)

National Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Iraq

Nazra for Feminist Studies

New Woman Foundation

Norwegian PEN

Observatorio Latinoamericano para la Libertad de Expresión (OLA)

Pakistan Press Foundation

Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA)

PEN American Center

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

Salma Network against Violence against Women in the Arab World

Samir Kassir Foundation

SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom

Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research

Syrian Human Rights League

Tunisian Centre for Freedom of the Press (CTPJ)

Uruk Independent Organization for Media

Witness

Women's Study Center

World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA)

World Press Freedom Committee

Writers in Prison Committee, PEN International

Yemen Organization for Defending Rights and Democratic Freedoms

World Organization Against Torture (OMCT)

FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights)

Front Line Defenders

Human Rights First

International Federation of Journalists