

Joint statement about Mazen Darwish and the court cases against SCM activists

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Fair Trial, Freedom of Speech, Justice and the Rule of Law, Shrinking Space for Civil Society, Solidarity with Human Rights Defenders, Statement, Syria

May 30, 2012

Read in: Arabic

Yesterday, on May 29, 2012, seven employees of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) and one SCM visitor were summoned to stand on trial at a military court in Damascus. They have been charged with “possessing prohibited materials with the intent to disseminate them”. However, at the start of the court hearings, the judge decided to postpone the trial until June 25, because the Air Force Intelligence (AFI) Service had failed to notify whether SCM Director Mazen Darwish would appear as a witness.

This trial fits in a pattern of censorship and repression against journalists, media workers, bloggers and activists who defend freedom of expression in Syria. Our organisations consider that the charges against them are politically motivated.

We, the undersigned human rights organisations express our concerns about the personal safety of SCM Director Mazen Darwish. Therefore, we have kindly requested His Excellency Mr Kofi Annan and his team to visit Mazen Darwish during this visit to Syria, and get first hand information about his health situation.

We call for the immediate release of Mazen Darwish, Hussein Ghareer, Abdelrahman Hamada, Mansour Al-Omari and Hani Zetani – the five people who remain in incommunicado detention in the Air Force Intelligence (AFI) detention centre without any charges, as well as the release of Bassam Al-Ahmad, Joan Farso, Ayham Ghazzoul, Yara Bader, Razan Ghazzawi, Mayadah Al-Khaleel, Sana Zetani and Hanadi Zhlout, who will stand on trial on June 25, 2012.

We express our solidarity with these media freedom activists and urge the judge to observe rigorously all the guarantees of a fair trial in accordance with international standards.

Trial against SCM

On February 16, 2012, the Air Force Intelligence (AFI) conducted a raid at the premises of SCM in Damascus during which they arrested 16 persons, including its Director, Mazen Darwish. Seven of them were conditionally released on March 18, 2012, and had to

report to the AFI detention centre every day for further interrogation. The others were kept in detention, some of them incommunicado.

On April 22, 2012, the Military Prosecutor in Damascus informed eight of the 16 initially arrested that they would be prosecuted by a military court for “possessing prohibited materials with the intent to disseminate them”, a criminal offense that is punishable by six months of imprisonment under Article 148 of the Criminal Code. These eight people would stand on trial yesterday, May 29. They are Bassam Al-Ahmad, Joan Farso and Ayham Ghazzoul (who were still detained on April 22) and Yara Bader, Razan Ghazzawi, Mayadah Al-Khaleel, Sana Zetani and Hanadi

Zahlout (who were released on bail on March 18 and again detained on April 22). Mrs Zahlout is not a SCM staff member, but was a visitor to the centre on February 16.

Meanwhile, five other activists are still held incommunicado in the AFI detention centre in Al-Mazzeah, Damascus. These are Mazen Darwish, Hussein Ghareer, Abdelrahman Hamada, Mansour Al-Omari and Hani Zetani. They have not been charged so far, but since their arrest on February 16 they have been denied access to their lawyers. Mazen Darwish and Hussein Ghareer are in solitary detention. Mazen Darwish has been subjected to torture and ill-treatment.

Suppression of freedom of expression

This trial fits in a pattern of censorship and repression against professional journalists, media workers, citizen journalists (bloggers) and media activists who defend freedom of expression in Syria. Syria is one of the most unsafe countries for them, with the highest number of killings. Since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011 several journalists and media activists have been killed. They have been executed, killed by car bombs or tortured to death. A horrible example is Khaled Mahmoud Kabbisho, who was arrested on April 17 and whose head was crushed by a tank of governmental troops. Three days earlier, the body of citizen journalist Alaa Al-Din Hassan Al-Douri was delivered at his family's home. There was evidence that he had been tortured to death. Citizen journalist Mohammed Abdelmawla Al-Hariri is now handicapped as a result of torture. At least 31 professional journalists, citizen journalists and media activists are currently detained by the Syrian authorities. This includes the staff of SCM who are still detained.

Signatories

Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies

Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network

Front Line Defenders

Hivos

International Media Support

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)
Reporters without Borders

Samir Kassir Foundation (SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom)