

Ongoing judicial and administrative harassment against Mr. Mazen Darwish

Copenhagen-Geneva-Paris, 17 June 2008. The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), jointly urge the Syrian authorities to immediately put an end to the ongoing judicial and administrative harassment against Mr. Mazen Darwish, Head of the Syrian Center for Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression and a member of the Committees for the Defense of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights (CDF).

The final hearing in Mr. Mazen Darwish's trial is planned to take place on 18 June 2008 before a military court. Mr. Darwish was arrested on 12 January 2008 as he, as a journalist, was covering the riots that took place in Adra, a suburb of Damascus. Mr. Darwish was released three days after his arrest. He was then charged under Article 387 of the Syrian Penal code for defaming the State's bodies as he reported a series of violations by the authorities affecting the physical integrity and property of some residents of Adra due to the poor management of the crisis by the local authorities. He also criticised the Syrian authorities for beating an adolescent in the police station of Adra.

In May and December 2007 Mr. Darwish was banned from leaving the country. More recently, on 8 June 2008, Mr. Darwish was prevented from traveling to Canada to attend the 29th Annual International Human Rights Training Program (IH RTP).

Furthermore, on 25 May 2008, the Syrian authorities cancelled a symposium entitled "Press Freedom" organized by Mr. Darwish, despite an authorisation obtained from the Ministry of Culture. The Syrian Centre for Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression was also prevented from holding a ceremony in the Club of Journalists in Damascus on the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day despite approval from the Syrian Journalists' Union.

This case illustrates once more the Syrian authorities' severe repression and harassment of human rights defenders in the country. Indeed, the EMHRN and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders are worried that Mr. Darwish was charged because of his human rights activities, in particular in favour of freedom of expression. The EMHRN and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders are also deeply concerned about the judicial proceedings of a civilian before a military court.

Therefore, the EMHRN and the Observatory call upon the Syrian authorities to:

- guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of Mr. Mazen Darwish;
- guarantee freedom of movement for Mr. Darwish and other human rights defenders in Syria;
- ensure that Mr. Darwish be brought before a civil, competent and impartial tribunal, and that his

procedural rights be guaranteed at all times, including the principle of adversary proceedings and the right of appeal;

- put an end to all kinds of harassment - including at the judicial level - against Mr. Mazen Darwish;
- recognise the Committees for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF) and other human rights and civil society organisations;
- put an end to harassment, intimidation, threats, and deliberate attacks on human rights defenders in Syria;
- conform with the provisions of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1998, especially its Article 1, which states that “everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels”, and Article 12.2, which provides that “the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, *de facto* or *de jure* adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the [...] Declaration”;
- and respect its human rights commitments according to international human rights standards and international instruments ratified by Syria, in particular the Barcelona Declaration to which Syria has agreed.

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