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(London) - Eight leading human rights organizations today called on the Syrian government to guarantee the safety of Muhannad al-Hassani, a human rights defender serving a three-year prison term, after he was assaulted last week in Adra prison, Damascus.

The eight organizations - Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Commission of Jurists, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) and Front Line - urged the Syrian government to investigate the assault and protect al-Hassani from further brutality or ill-treatment.

Al-Hassani, an internationally known lawyer and human rights defender, was physically assaulted on October 28, 2010, by a prisoner sentenced for a criminal offense who was being held in the same cell in Adra prison. The assault came two weeks after a ceremony in Geneva at which the imprisoned lawyer was due to have been presented with the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders.

For five days after the attack, al-Hassani continued to be held in the same cell as his attacker, but is then reported to have been moved to a tiny underground isolation cell. He and other political prisoners in Adra prison have now launched a hunger strike to protest against his solitary confinement.

The prisoner who attacked al-Hassani is said to have been moved into the same cell only recently and to have beaten him using a heavy metal finger ring he was wearing at the time of the assault, although prisoners are not normally permitted to wear such jewelry. As a result of the assault, al-Hassani suffered a cut to his forehead requiring ten stitches, swelling to his eye and cheek, and bruising to his body.

Following the incident, the police took statements from other prisoners who had witnessed the assault and interviewed al-Hassani in the presence of his attacker, but reportedly took no action when the attacker continued to threaten him and accused him of being unpatriotic and did not even make note of the threats.

Al-Hassani was subsequently taken to a doctor at a government forensic clinic in Douma, a town between Adra and Damascus, who issued a report on his injuries on November 1. The case was referred to a court in Douma though al-Hassani's lawyers were not informed and so were unable to be present at the hearing.

The eight human rights organizations call on the Syrian authorities to carry out a prompt, thorough, and transparent, independent investigation into the assault on al-Hassani and the circumstances which led to his being exposed to such risk. In particular, they must examine whether officials at Adra prison were complicit in the attack by moving the prisoner responsible into al-Hassani's cell to facilitate it, and why they continued to hold them in the same cell for several days afterwards. The results of such an investigation should be made public, and those responsible for the attack must be brought to justice.

The eight organizations also called for an immediate end to al-Hassani's solitary confinement and for guarantees of his safety while he remains in prison.

Amnesty International and other organizations consider al-Hassani a prisoner of conscience who should be released immediately and unconditionally.

He is serving a three-year sentence imposed in June 2010. His trial before the Damascus Criminal Court was unfair.

Background

Al-Hassani is a lawyer and co-founder of the Syrian Human Rights Organization (Sawasiyah). He has been repeatedly targeted by the Syrian authorities on account of his human rights work.

He was sentenced to a three-year prison term in June 2010 after the Damascus Criminal Court convicted him of "weakening national sentiments" and "spreading false news." These charges, which are commonly used against government critics, were brought after he published information about unfair trials of political prisoners and torture in Syria, and met foreign embassy officials to discuss human rights.

Al-Hassani is a commissioner of the International Commission of Jurists and was awarded the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for 2010 in recognition of his contribution to human rights. The chairperson of the awards panel described him as a man of "exceptional courage" who is being "arbitrarily detained in unacceptable conditions for defending the rule of law and the right to organize a human rights organization."

In October 2010 he received the Dean Award from the Amsterdam Bar Association in recognition of his work as a human rights lawyer.

Other government critics are previously reported to have been assaulted by criminal inmates, as well as prison guards, while held in Adra prison.

In December 2006, for example, Anwar al-Bunni, another human rights lawyer, was pushed down a flight of stairs by a criminal detainee and beaten on his head in the presence of prison guards, who failed to intervene.

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