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TUNISIA: How long before the international community take action?

This weekend, the Tunisian authorities demonstrated once more their complete disregard for human rights and freedom of expression.

On May 20-21, the Tunisian branch of Amnesty International (AI) was holding its General Assembly in the Amilcar Hotel, Tunis. They had invited Mr. Yves Steiner, board member of International Amnesty Switzerland, to participate in the General Assembly.

In the early afternoon of May 21, as the meeting was underway, around ten plain clothes policemen went to the hotel and requested to see Mr. Steiner. The presence of 200 or so AI members discouraged them to go further. A group of fifty policemen returned 3 hours later, just as the Swiss ambassador in Tunisia was arriving at the hotel, and forced Yves Steiner to follow them without any explanation or warrant. At around 8:30 pm, Mr. Steiner was able to contact his colleagues to let them know that he had left the police station where had had been detained and that he was about to be expelled to France.

The arrest, detention and expulsion of Mr. Steiner takes place against the backdrop of increasing repression against human rights defenders and freedom of expression and assembly in Tunisia. It may also mark yet another phase in the repression as the Tunisian authorities have now targeted an international observer – by so doing attempting to send a chilling message throughout the human rights community in Tunisia and globally.

ARTICLE 19 calls upon the international community, and especially France and the United States, to take decisive actions against the continued climate of violations and repression in the country. The international community has turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to the abusive detentions, ill-treatments, torture, and censorship that have characterized the Tunisian regime for many years. Human rights, human rights defenders, and freedom of expression can no longer be the hostages of short sighted international politics.

Background

Five months after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) focused international attention on the host country Tunisia's poor human rights record, freedom of expression remains well below international standards in the country.

A recent fact-finding mission by the International Freedom of Expression Exchange Tunisia Monitoring Group (TMG) whose members include ARTICLE 19 and other prominent freedom of expression groups found:

- Continuing imprisonment of individuals based on expression of their opinions or media activities.
- Blocking of websites, including news and information websites.
- Restricting freedom of association, including the right of organisations to be legally established, and to hold meetings.
- Restricting freedom of movement of human rights defenders and political dissidents, along with surveillance by the political police, harassment, and intimidation.
- Censoring the press and lack of diversity of content in newspapers, especially in the state-controlled press.
- Censoring books through the legal submission procedure.
- Attempting to smear the reputations of activists, which are unlawful actions that are not being investigated.
- Official harassment of attorneys and judges who press for independence of the judiciary.

Since the WSIS in November 2005, the Tunisian government has not only failed to improve the situation substantially, it has increased restrictions on human rights defenders, judges and some independent journalists.

Civil society organisations - even those legally recognised - continue to be harassed by plain-clothes police. Opposition activists are often blocked from reaching meetings and gatherings. They have reported that they are constantly under surveillance and their organisation websites are monitored and blocked.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent non-profit organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.