

Syria – Joint Urgent Alert: Serious concerns over the lives of detainees in Homs Central Prison

Hundreds of arbitrarily detained persons engage in a hunger strike to demand their release

520 persons arbitrarily detained in Homs Central Prison began a hunger strike on Tuesday, 17 October 2017 demanding their immediate release after spending several years in arbitrary detention. These demands were renewed in the aftermath of direct threats from the “new administration” of the prison, represented by brigadier Bilal Suleiman Mahmoud. These threats began with cutting of the water and electrical supplies for several hours during a failed attempt to storm the prison. The prisoners are in control of two buildings in the prison, in protest of possible referral of several of them to exceptional courts and security branches.

The situation of Homs Central Prison came to the forefront after a visit to the prison by a delegation from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the 16th of October 2017 to review the health situation of prisoners, the quality of food provided, and other related issues. However, the prison administration monitored the interviews by insisting on the attendance of the prison police members during the interviews. This prevented prisoners from fully presenting their demands to the ICRC, especially the demands of 492 individuals imprisoned as a result of the conflict in Syria, who have spent several years in detention (most of the earlier detainees were referred to security branches in 2011 and 2012). According to reliable sources based inside the prison, there are (28) detainees in danger of being referred to military field courts, in addition to (462) detainees who were referred to the “Terrorism Court” which lacks international standards towards the conduct of fair trials. In addition, (30) detainees are being held for different criminal reasons.

The prison's director continues his threats to storm the buildings where prisoners are held, broadcasting them through the prison's intercom system. Detainees reported that the prison director also threatened to burn them with their families.

The undersigned organizations demand that the Syrian government immediately accept the demands of hunger strikers, particularly those related to their right to not be subjected to ill-treatment, or prolonged arbitrary detention any longer. The signatories also demand that Syrian authorities refrain from referring prisoners to military field courts or other courts, such as “the Terrorism Court,” and to stop all arbitrary executions.

The signatories call on:

- The United Nations and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights:

1. To work to provide serious guarantees to prevent storming of the prison and committing a massacre of prisoners, or inflicting torture and abuses against them.
2. To exert serious pressure on the Syrian government to compel it to review all arbitrary sentences issued against detainees by courts that are not legally constituted, and which do not abide by international standards for fair trials.

- The International Committee of the Red Cross:

To find out the real demands of the prisoners, and ensure their security and safety through an emergency field visit to determine the health status of more than 25 elderly prisoners (over the age of sixty), particularly those who suffer from chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and other diseases.

- Sponsors of the Astana negotiations and the Office of the Special Envoy:

To exert pressure on the Syrian and Russian authorities to refrain from linking the issue of detainees with military issues on the field, and to refuse linking the issue of Homs Prison with the military situation in the field, as during the agreement of Al-wa'ir neighborhood in Homs. The governor of Homs informed prisoners that their status was directly linked to reaching an agreement in Al-Wa'ir yet none of the prisoners were released after signing and later implementing the Al-Wa'ir agreement.

Signatories:

1. Association of Detainees and Missing Persons in Sednaya Prison
2. Dawlaty
3. Doctors and Lawyers for Human Rights
4. EuroMed Rights
5. Human Rights Guardians
6. Justice for Life Organization
7. Syrians for Truth and Justice
8. Syrian Network for Human Rights
9. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression
10. Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research
11. Syria Justice and Accountability Center
12. The Day After
13. Urnammu
14. Violations Documentation Center in Syria