

Date de mise en ligne :
Monday 2 November 2009

Presidential threats against independent journalists put into practice

FIDH > Les Droits de l'Homme pour Tous / Human Rights for All

Paris-Geneva-Copenhagen, October 29, 2009. The 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), and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network express their deepest concern about acts of harassment against the Tunisian journalists Messrs. Taoufik Ben Brik, Slim Boukhdir and Mouldi Zouabi.

In the past few weeks, those three journalists have been particularly active in denouncing the practices and acts contrary to international standards which intensified in the framework of the electoral context, and our organisations fear that the acts of repression against them might be part of "the measures" announced by President Ben Ali "against anyone who will express accusations or doubts on the integrity of the electoral process, without providing concrete evidence". On the eve of the polling day on October 25, 2009, the Tunisian President also stigmatised those he had qualified as the "tiny Tunisian minority who denigrates its country by relying on foreign groups".

On October 29, 2009, at about 13h00, Mr. **Taoufik Ben Brik**, a journalist and founding member of the National Council for Freedoms in Tunisia (Conseil national pour les libertés en Tunisie - CNLT), was imprisoned in the Bouchoucha preventive detention centre, following his summoning at the police station a bit earlier in the morning. He was to appear before the court on October 30, 2009, upon charges of "aggression". This accusation would have been formulated under the basis of a complaint lodged by a woman who asserted she was attacked following a car collision with Mr. Ben Brik. According to the information received, in reality the plaintiff crashed into Mr. Ben Brik's car on October 22, before insulting and assaulting him, and tearing up his clothes, trying obviously to provoke him. At no time would Mr. Ben Brik have been violent.

Furthermore, on October 28, Mr. **Slim Boukhdir**, a journalist and founding member of the association for the defence of freedoms "Liberty and Equity" (Liberté et équité), was kidnapped in front of his house by unknown persons in plain clothes, who blindfolded him and forced him to get into a car. They subsequently drove him over the Belvédère hill (Tunis heights), where he was beaten. Mr. Boukhdir was stripped off his clothes, his wallet and his telephone, and was abandoned on the scene, suffering from a nose fracture and several bruises.

On the same day, unknown persons attempted on three occasions to force the door of Mr. **Moudi Zouabi's** house, correspondent with the London-based Pan-Arabic newspaper Al Quds Al Arabi, and with the website of the satellite television channel Al-Arabiya. Mr. Zouabi called the police, which came at his home but did not notice anything of concern. In addition, Mr. Zouabi would be very closely followed by the police over the past few days.

Moreover, Mr. **Zouhair Makhlouf**, a member of the association "Liberty and Equity", leader of the Progressive Democratic Party (Parti démocrate progressiste - PDP) and former candidate to the October 25, 2009 legislative elections, detained since October 21, 2009 in Mornaguia prison, close to Tunis, will appear before the Court of First Instance of Grombalia on November 3, 2009.

The Observatory and the EMHRN denounce the ongoing and extremely worrying acts of harassment against Tunisian human rights defenders, and call upon the European Commission Delegation in Tunis as well as the European Union member States embassies in Tunisia to visit Mr. Ben Brik and Mr. Makhlouf in detention, and to observe the hearings against them, in conformity with the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.

Our organisations also call upon the above-mentioned Delegation and embassies to issue a public report, if possible a joint one, about the violations of fair trial standards and about any other concern observed during the hearings.

Human Rights Defenders

The Observatory and the EMHRN also call upon the Tunisian authorities to:

- Guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of Messrs. Taoufik Ben Brik, Slim Boukhdir, Mouldi Zouabi and Zouhair Makhoulouf, as well as all human rights defenders in Tunisia;
- Release immediately and unconditionally Messrs. Taoufik Ben Brik and Zouhair Makhoulouf, arbitrarily detained;
- Order an immediate, thorough, effective and impartial investigation into the above-mentioned acts of harassment and violence, the result of which must be made public, in order to identify all those responsible, bring them before a civil competent and impartial tribunal in compliance with international law;
- Put an end to all threats and acts of harassment - including at the judicial level - against Messrs. Taoufik Ben Brik, Slim Boukhdir, Mouldi Zouabi and Zouhair Makhoulouf, as well as against all human rights defenders in Tunisia.

More generally, our organisations urge Tunisia to comply with all the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and with regional and international human rights instruments, in particular with article 1 of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 9, 1998, which provides that "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels".