
"Israel must stop harassment, intimidation and abusive treatment of rights defender Issa Amro"

GENEVA (13 August 2013) – A group of United Nations independent human rights experts* expressed deep concern at the alleged ongoing judicial harassment, intimidation and abusive treatment directed against Issa Amro, a prominent Palestinian human rights defender.

Mr. Amro was arrested and detained 20 times in 2012, and six times so far in 2013, although he has never engaged in violence nor been charged with a crime. He is a founder of non-governmental organizations Youth Against Settlements and Hebron Defenders.

"Mr. Amro appears to be the victim of a pattern of harassment that includes an effort to intimidate him prior to his participation at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in June 2013 as NGO representative where he delivered two statements," said the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories, Richard Falk.

"Right before participating at this session of the Council, he received a summons to appear at Ofer Military Court on 30 December 2013," Mr. Falk recalled. "At this point, there is no indication of any charges against Mr. Amro."

Over the past months, Mr. Amro has also received a number of death threats from settler organizations. "Among the most insidious features of the prolonged occupation of the West Bank has been the high degree of complicity linking the Israeli military administration to the violence of the unlawful settlers against Palestinian inhabitants," Mr. Falk noted.

On 8 July 2013, Mr. Amro was along with a French television crew in the heavily guarded Ibrahimi Mosque compound in the old City of Hebron in the West Bank when Israeli soldiers stopped the group and took away their identity documents. All identity documents were returned with the exception of those of Mr. Amro.

Israeli soldiers then took him away to the police station, where he was handcuffed and beaten until he collapsed. Mr. Amro was reportedly left lying in pain on a stretcher while allegedly members of the Israeli Security Forces laughed, took photos and threatened to shoot him. It was only more than five hours later that he was hospitalized.

"I am very concerned for Mr. Amro's life, physical integrity and the psychological toll that this is having on his health and family," said the UN Special Rapporteur on torture, Juan E. Méndez, while stressing that there is an absolute and non-derogable ban under international human rights law on the use of torture as well as cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. "It is beyond comprehension that the police summoned him the following morning to the same police station where he was abused."

More recently, on 25 July, heavily armed Israeli soldiers raided the Youth Against Settlements Centre. On the following day, Mr. Amro and three other activists were fired upon by suspected Israeli settlers when they were nearby the offices of the Centre.

"The right to freedom of association suggests that those exercising it are specifically protected from threats or use of violence, harassment, persecution, intimidation or reprisals," stressed the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Maina Kiai. "Those responsible for these unacceptable acts against Mr. Amro should be held accountable, while members of the Youth Against Settlements Centre should immediately be granted adequate protection."

"This is an unacceptable campaign of harassment, intimidation and reprisals against Mr. Amro, and other human rights defenders who peacefully advocate for the rights of Palestinians in the West Bank, including by cooperating with UN human rights bodies," added the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders, Margaret Sekaggya.

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue, noted that during his visit to the West Bank in 2011 he had been deeply concerned by the restrictions imposed by Israel on the work of human rights defenders and journalists working in the occupied territory. "Intimidation through arbitrary arrests risks silencing important voices that inform us about the real situation on the ground," he said.

"We call on the Government of Israel to make sure that every allegation of torture or of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of Palestinians in Israeli custody is investigated in a thorough and transparent investigation and that those responsible are held accountable for their acts," urged the Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories.

"The Government of Israel must take steps to ensure that Israeli settlers are not permitted to harass and intimidate Palestinians with impunity. I also continue to be concerned by Israel's use of military courts to try Palestinian civilians in the occupied territories," Mr. Falk said.

(*) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories, Richard Falk; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Margaret Sekaggya; Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Maina Kiai; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank William La Rue; and Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Juan E. Méndez.

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