

23 September 2014

Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: Rupert Colville

Location: Geneva

- (1) Syria
 - (2) Thailand
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1) Syria

We are gravely concerned about the situation around the northern Syrian area of Kobani, whose residents, mostly Kurdish, have been fleeing an onslaught by fighters from the Takfiri group, known by a variety of names including ISIL, over the past few days. Residents of Kobani have lived in difficult humanitarian conditions since the town and surrounding villages first came under siege by ISIL forces last year, with shortages of food, fuel and potable water.

In the past week, since 15 September, ISIL has reportedly captured at least 105 Kurdish villages in Kobani. We have received very alarming reports of deliberate killing of civilians, including women and children, the abduction of hundreds of Kurds by ISIL, and widespread looting and destruction of infrastructure and private property. In interviews with the UN Human Rights Office, those who have fled the area also warned that there is a severe water shortage. Kobani's main supply of water came from wells in the towns of Oukhan, Qula and Qientra, all of which are now under ISIL control. While an estimated 138,000 people have fled the area, hundreds of thousands remain in the region, living in fear of the kind of persecution that ISIL has carried out against religious and ethnic minorities elsewhere in Syria and Iraq.

Also in Syria, we are closely following the trial of human rights defender Mazen Darwish who, along with two colleagues, has been charged with "promoting terrorist acts" as prescribed under article 8 of Syria's broad and ill-defined anti-terrorism law. Mr. Darwish, Hani Al-Zitani and Hussein Ghareer worked with the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression and were detained in February 2012 in Damascus by Syrian Air Force Intelligence officials during a raid on their office.

The men have reportedly been ill-treated and tortured in detention, but these allegations have not been investigated. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has found that the three had been arbitrarily detained due to their human rights work, and has called for their immediate release. On June 9, the Government announced an amnesty, including for anyone charged under article 8 of the anti-terrorism law which formed the basis of the charges against

Darwish, Al-Zitani and Ghareer, but they were never freed. The men are due to appear in court tomorrow, possibly for both the verdict and sentencing.

We call on the Syrian Government to release all those who have been detained for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association, including human rights defenders, journalists and political opponents who have been detained under the anti-terrorism law.

2) Thailand

We are very disappointed by the decision of an appellate court in Thailand affirming the conviction and sentencing of the editor and activist Somyot Pruksakasemsuk in Thailand on 19 September. Mr. Somyot, the editor of *Voice of Thaksin* magazine, was convicted under the lèse majesté law after the magazine published two articles deemed offensive to the King. In 2013, he was sentenced to 11 years in prison, and the sentence was upheld on Friday. The authorities reportedly did not inform Mr. Somyot's lawyer or his family of the date of the appeal verdict, thereby preventing them from attending the court.

In 2013, the High Commissioner publicly expressed deep concerns about Mr. Somyot's conviction and extremely harsh sentencing, saying his case represented a setback for the protection and promotion of human rights in Thailand. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has concluded that Somyot's detention is arbitrary and called on the Government of Thailand to release him.

Since the coup d'état on 22 May, according to information available to us, the number of people in custody under the lèse majesté law has risen from 6 to 22, with another eight people facing charges but not currently in custody. We reiterate our call to the military government to restore space for free expression and public dialogue, in line with Thailand's international human rights obligations.

ENDS

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