

Communiqué on the Detention of Human Rights Defenders in Tunisia

We, the undersigned civil society organisations, express our profound concern regarding the worsening and spread of narratives that perpetuate racism and hostility towards foreigners in Tunisia. These narratives overlook the underlying causes of the migrant crisis and unfairly target sub-Saharan migrants, consequently worsening their already precarious situation.

Sherifa Riahi, a well-respected human rights activist and valued member of the AfricanDefenders Steering Committee, was recently apprehended and held in police custody under the **Terrorism and Money Laundering Law** 2015-26 of 7 August 2015. The interrogation focused on the activities of Terre d'Asile, an association she previously served as an Executive Director, its financing, projects and programmes, and the type of services it provides to vulnerable populations, especially sub-Saharan immigrants. So far, no clear charges have been made against her. Similarly, Saadia Mosbah, the association's President "Mnemy," was also detained for investigation. Ladh Bousselmi, the current Executive Director of Terre d'Asile, was taken into police custody with the same case. It is disconcerting that the authorities are using such tactics to intimidate associations that provide aid to migrants and asylum seekers in Tunisia.

This comes in the wake of a **statement** by President Kais Saeid on May 7th, during a Security Council meeting addressing irregular migration. President Saeid remarked that associations receiving significant foreign funding were deemed **"traitors and agents"** and should not supplant the state's role in managing migration and fighting human trafficking.

Additionally, we wish to unequivocally condemn President Saeid's **statement** on sub-Saharan migrants in 2023, which claimed that **"There is a criminal plan to change the composition of the demographic landscape in Tunisia, and some individuals have received large sums of money to give residence to sub-Saharan migrants"**. We believe that such a statement is purely racist and xenophobic and serves as a basis for a surge of false narratives on sub-Saharan migrants, ultimately leading to repression against human rights defenders.

We are greatly concerned that Civil Society Organisations and Human Rights Defenders are continuously criticised and vilified. Thus, we express our unwavering support for all organisations and associations that are the subject of such campaigns and for all activists who are victims of defamation and prosecution.

We strongly denounce the growing acts of intimidation, harassment, and detentions of HRDs. We urgently demand the immediate release of all activists detained for their associative activities and an end to all proceedings against them. With utmost gravity, we urge the authorities to find practical solutions to this crisis and ensure that all detained activists are released immediately.

We urge the authorities to formulate policies to resolve this humanitarian crisis in collaboration with civil society organisations and associations without undermining Tunisians' pride in belonging to their continent, region, and history.

Signatories

1. African Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD Initiative)
2. AfricanDefenders (Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network)
3. Algerian Human Rights Network.
4. Coalition Burkinabé des Défenseurs des Droits Humains
5. Coalition Burundaise des Défenseurs des Droits de l'Homme
6. Coalition des volontaires pour la paix et le Développement (CVPD , Goma)
7. Coalition Ivoirienne des Défenseurs des droits humains
8. Coalition Malienne des Défenseurs des Droits Humains
9. Coalition Sénégalaise des Défenseurs des droits Humains
10. Coalition Togolaise des Défenseurs des droits Humains
11. DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Human Rights Defenders Project)
12. Defenders Coalition Kenya
13. Gender Centre for Empowering Development (GenCED)
14. Human Rights Defenders Network – Sierra Leone
15. La Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme
16. National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders – Somalia and Somaliland
17. National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders – Uganda
18. Network of Frontline EHRD in Tanzania (NET-FEHRD's).
19. Oil Refinery Residents Association (ORRA)
20. PILEX Centre For Civic Education Initiative
21. Protection International Africa
22. Réseau des Défenseurs des Droits Humains en Afrique Centrale (REDHAC)
23. Réseau Nigérien des Défenseurs des Défenseurs des droits Humains
24. Réseau Ouest-Africain Des Défenseurs Des Droits De L'homme
25. South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network
26. Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (SouthernDefenders)
27. Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition
28. Youth Concern on Environment and Development (YCED-UGANDA)

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