



To: Health Professional Network
From: Special Thematic Projects Team
Date: 9 July 2010

Mordechai Vanunu
Prisoner of conscience
Israel



Mordechai Vanunu, c. 2007
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Amnesty International is concerned for the health and wellbeing of 56-year-old Israeli nuclear industry whistleblower, Mordechai Vanunu, a prisoner of conscience, who has been held in solitary confinement for more than five weeks. Mordechai Vanunu previously spent 11 years in solitary confinement after he was sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment in 1986 for revealing details of the country's nuclear arsenal to a UK newspaper, *The Sunday Times*. Amnesty International believes that individuals exposed to prolonged or repeated periods in solitary confinement may experience depression, anxiety, and other significant mental health problems.¹

According to Vanunu's lawyer, the Israeli authorities claim they are holding him in isolation in order to protect him from attacks from other prisoners. He is being held in a special unit for dangerous prisoners in Ayalon Prison, which is an inappropriate measure for a prisoner who does not pose any credible threat to others.

The harsh conditions under which he is held mean that he can leave his cell for only one hour a day to walk in the prison courtyard. He has not

¹ S. Grassian, "Psychopathological effects of solitary confinement", *American Journal of Psychiatry* 1983, 140: 1450-1454; S. Grassian, "Psychiatric effects of solitary confinement", *Journal of Law and Policy*, 2006, 22: 325-84; C. Haney, "Mental health issues in long-term solitary and 'supermax' confinement", *Crime and Delinquency* 2003, 49(1): 124-156; P. S. Smith, "The effects of solitary confinement on prison inmates: a brief history and review of the literature", *Crime and Justice* 2006, 34: 441-528.

been in touch with friends or family since the beginning of his current incarceration as a result of a dispute between him and the prison authorities over the conditions under which he can make phone calls. While he continues to be imprisoned, Amnesty International believes that he should be transferred to an alternative wing or a prison where he would not be under threat from fellow prisoners and would not need to be held in solitary confinement.

Mordechai Vanunu's brother, Meir Vanunu, told Amnesty International on 17 June 2010: "It is very traumatic for Mordechai to be put again in solitary confinement and subjected to harassment. These are the same conditions he was kept under previously for 18 years and there is no justification for it after 24 years of suffering. We fear for the impact this will have on his health. Now is the time for Mordechai's true freedom – he should be allowed to travel and leave Israel. He should never have been put in this situation in the first place."

His lawyer, Michael Sfard, was able to visit him and told Amnesty International: "Mordechai Vanunu is suffering from isolation. He should not be made to pay a price because of the enmity of others towards him."

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Mordechai Vanunu as he is a prisoner of conscience who has been imprisoned solely for exercising his rights to freedom of expression and association. Amnesty International remains concerned that his isolation and other measures against him are not conducive to good mental health and consequently there is a danger that Mordechai Vanunu's health could be affected adversely.

Background

A former technician at Israel's nuclear plant near the southern town of Dimona, Mordechai Vanunu spent 18 years of his life in an Israeli prison for revealing details of the country's nuclear arsenal to the UK newspaper *The Sunday Times*. This followed his abduction by Mossad agents in Italy on 30 September 1986, his secret transfer to Israel and his trial, at which he was convicted on charges of treason and aggravated espionage. He spent the first 11 years of his 18-year sentence in solitary confinement.

He was finally released in April 2004 but draconian conditions were imposed on him at the time of his release by a military order issued by the Israeli authorities. These severely restricted his freedom of movement, expression and association. His passport was confiscated and he was banned from leaving the country. This means that he has been unable to fulfil his wish to travel to the United States of America in order to be with his adoptive parents and to recover from the physical and psychological strain of 18 years in prison. He is also required to live at an assigned residence and is forbidden from communicating with foreigners, including journalists; he cannot go near foreign embassies and must inform the police if he wishes to change his habitual place of residence. Such restrictions are arbitrary and contrary to international law, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Israel has ratified.

On 30 April 2007, Mordechai Vanunu was convicted of breaching these restrictions by speaking to foreigners and sentenced to six months in prison, reduced on appeal to three. He was released on bail while the court process was ongoing but, on 11 May 2010, the Israeli Supreme Court decided he should be imprisoned for three months. Mordechai Vanunu was arrested and re-imprisoned on 23 May 2010.

During previous court hearings, Mordechai Vanunu was given the option of doing community service in West Jerusalem instead of serving the three-month sentence. He refused this option because of fears for his own security. He has said that when he travels to West Jerusalem to attend court hearings, he is often threatened and insulted by Israelis, some of whom consider him a national traitor. He says he has received death threats. He had agreed to perform community service in East Jerusalem, but this was not permitted by the court.

Recommended action

Please write to the Israeli authorities below:

- Explaining that you are a health professional concerned about human rights;

- Calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Mordechai Vanunu on the basis that he is a prisoner of conscience detained solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression and association;
- Noting the potential negative health effects of solitary confinement and urging the authorities to ensure that, pending his release, Mordechai Vanunu is moved to a prison where his safety and security can be guaranteed, and where he can have contact with others;
- Further urging that he should be permitted to have regular access to both fresh air and somewhere where he can engage in meaningful exercise;
- Urging the authorities to ensure that on his release the military order that imposes arbitrary restrictions upon him is annulled.

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Salutation Dear Minister

Please also send copies to diplomatic representatives of Israel accredited to your country.

If you receive no reply within six weeks of sending your letter, please send a follow-up letter seeking a response. Please send copies of any letters you receive to the International Secretariat, attention of the Special Thematic Projects team, 1 Easton Street, London WC1X 0DW or e-mail: health@amnesty.org