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Syria: Amnesty International calls for release of political activist

Amnesty International is calling for the release of Fa'eq 'Ali Asa'd, a longstanding critic of the Syrian authorities, who was sentenced to a three year prison term on 31 December 2007. The sentence was immediately commuted to 18 months' imprisonment.

Fa'eq 'Ali Asa'd (who is generally known as Fa'eq al-Mir), aged 63, is a member of the central committee of the People's Democratic Party, an unauthorised political party which is critical of the Syrian authorities. He was arrested on 13 December 2006 by security forces in the town of Tartous and has remained in detention since that time. His trial opened on 29 August 2006 before the Damascus First Criminal Court which, on 31 December 2007, found him guilty of "circulating false or exaggerated news which would weaken the morale of the nation" under Article 286/1 of the Syrian Penal Code. The charge relates apparently to a telephone call which Fa'eq al-Mir made to Elias 'Atallah, the Secretary General of the Democratic Left Movement in Lebanon and a member of the March 14 Coalition, which is known for its criticism of the Syrian authorities' policies in Lebanon. The charge seems also to relate to a visit Fa'eq al-Mir made to Lebanon in 2006 to offer condolences to the family of the assassinated Lebanese politician, George Hawi, former Secretary General of the Lebanese Communist Party. Fa'eq al-Mir is reported to have denied the charge brought against him and stated that he telephoned Elias 'Atallah only in his capacity as the leader of the Lebanese Democratic Left Movement.

Another charge of "circulating knowingly false or exaggerated news abroad, which would harm the State or its financial standing" initially brought against him under Article 287 of the Penal Code, was dropped in accordance with an amnesty provision, number 58 of 2006.

The court has also decided to consider Fa'eq al-Mir's detention period as part of his sentence, and it is expected that he may be released within the coming month.

Fa'eq al-Mir was previously imprisoned for 10 years since 1989 until 1999 due to his political activity.

Amnesty International considers Fa'eq al-Mir to be prisoner of conscience and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.