

URGENT ACTION

BLOGGER CONVICTED WITH 10 YEAR PRISON SENTENCE

Following more than 16 months in pre-trial detention, Algerian blogger Merzoug Touati was convicted to 10 years prison terms for some peaceful online posts. The Court of Appeal in Bejaya will review its conviction on 21 June. He is a prisoner of conscience.

On 24 May, the Court of First Instance in Bejaya convicted Algerian blogger **Merzoug Touati** to 10 years in prison and a fine of 50,000 Algerian dinars (approximately USD \$430) on trumped-up charges based only on his online posts. He was sentenced on charges of "incitement to non-armed gathering", "foreign intelligence aiming at harming diplomatic ties", and "incitement to gatherings and sit-ins in public spaces". A charge of "incitement to take up arms against the authority of the state", which could have carried a death sentence, was dropped. The Court of Appeal in Bejaya will review his sentence on 21 June, which could reintroduce the death penalty charge.

Since 22 January 2017, Merzoug Touati has been in pre-trial detention and is currently held in Oued Ghir prison in the northern city of Béjaïa. The authorities accused him of incitement to violence and espionage in relation to a Facebook post and a video interview he had recorded.

Merzoug Touati's detention has been extended on two occasions for four months, the second of which expired on 22 January. He was kept in prison despite the investigative judge failed to order another renewal since then. Merzoug Touati has conducted at least seven hunger strikes to protest his extended detention. According to his lawyer, the prison guards prevented him from sleeping during his hunger strikes by entering his cell several times during the night. He was recently moved to a new overcrowded cell, where he is forced to sleep on the floor as he doesn't have a bed or a mattress, unlike the other fellow detainees.

Merzoug Touati is a university graduate who was unemployed at the time of his arrest. He was not affiliated to any political party or association. In 2015, he began to run a Facebook page and a blog called *Alhogra.com*, since deleted, where he regularly commented on political and human rights developments in Algeria. He is prisoner of conscience held solely for expressing his peaceful opinions.

Please write immediately in Arabic, French or your own language urging Algerian authorities to:

- release Merzoug Touati immediately and unconditionally and ensure that his conviction is quashed, as he is a prisoner of conscience detained solely for peacefully expressing his views online;
- immediately ensure that his detention conditions are in line with international law;
- amend legislation that criminalizes freedom of expression and immediately and unconditionally release all individuals held solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 27 JULY 2018 TO:

President of the Republic
Abdelaziz Bouteflika
Presidency of the Republic
El Mouradia, Algiers
Algeria
Fax: +213 21 6915 95 / +213 21 6096 18
Email: president@el-mouradia.dz
Salutation: Your Excellency

Justice Minister
Tayeb Louh
Ministry of Justice
8 Place Bir Hakem
16030 El Biar, Algiers
Algeria
Fax: +213 21 9217 01
Email: contact@mjustice.dz

Salutation: Your Excellency
And copies to:
President, National human rights institution
Mme Fafa Benzerrouki Sid Lakhdar
Conseil national des droits de l'Homme
Palais du Peuple
Avenue Franklin Roosevelt
Algiers, Algeria
Fax: +213 21 23 99 58
Email: contact@cncppdh-algerie.org

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please insert local diplomatic addresses below:

Name Address 1 Address 2 Address 3 Fax Fax number Email Email address Salutation Salutation

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Merzoug Touati is a citizen-journalist, author of the *Alhogra.com* blog, where he regularly commented on political and human rights developments on his blog and on Facebook. The blog had reached a significant readership with over 20,000 likes on Facebook, before being deleted by the authorities after his arrest. His most recent posts covered communal violence in Ghardaia, the Amazigh cultural rights, as well as the legislative elections.

Police raided his home, seized his computer, and arrested him, in Bejaia, Kabylia on 18 January 2017 after he published a post on Facebook and a video interview on his YouTube channel, which contained no calls to violence, but criticized the authorities' attempts to stamp out dissent.

In the first post on 2 January 2017 he called for Béjaïa residents to protest the new Finance Law.

In the second post on YouTube on 8 January 2017, Merzoug Touati interviewed an Israeli foreign ministry spokesperson via teleconference, who denied accusations by the Algerian authorities that the Israeli authorities were involved in protests in Algeria. This rebuked the frequent accusation made by the Algerian authorities that Algerian unrest against austerity measures are manipulated by foreign governments, including Israel. In the same interview, the Israeli spokesperson revealed the contact of Israeli-Algerian officials up to Israel's war on Gaza in the year 2000.

During his interrogation, Merzoug Touati told the investigative judge that the interviews he had conducted with diplomats, human rights defenders, and activists from different religious and political backgrounds were solely for documentation purposes for his online articles to enlighten public opinion.

Amnesty International reviewed the court documents, which listed as the only "evidence" the posts published by Merzoug Touati before his Facebook account and website were deleted, and found that there was no incitement to violence or advocacy of hatred. Merzoug Touati's lawyer Salah Dabouz told Amnesty International that "the facts on which the Court of First Instance based its verdict have no relation with the charges against him".

Amnesty International considers Merzoug Touati a prisoner of conscience, held solely for expressing his peaceful opinions.

For more information: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/algeria-blogger-facing-death-penalty-for-online-posts/> and <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/algeria-blogger-sentenced-to-10-years-for-online-posts/>.

Name: Merzoug Touati
m/f: m

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