



FREEDOM NOW

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 8, 2011

Contact: Marc Gottridge
+1 212-909-0643

SYRIAN GOVERNMENT RELEASES 80-YEAR OLD HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYER AND ACTIVIST HAITHAM AL-MALEH

Washington, D.C.: Today, the Government of Syria released prisoner of conscience Haitham Al-Maleh, an 80-year old Syrian human rights lawyer and activist, from his wrongful imprisonment. The government had held Mr. Al-Maleh since October 14, 2009, when it arrested and charged him with “spreading false news that could weaken the national morale.” Mr. Al-Maleh’s friend and fellow human rights lawyer, Muhannad Al-Hassani, however, remains in prison after being arrested on similar charges on July 28, 2009.

In response to the news, Freedom Now attorney Sachi Jensen said, “I am relieved Haitham is reunited with his family and can now receive the medical attention he has long needed. The Syrian government’s treatment of this hero, for sixty years of tireless human rights advocacy, is shameful testimony of its intolerance toward dissent. We must not forget others, like Muhannad Al-Hassani, who remain victim to this oppression.”

Mr. Al-Maleh is a renowned human rights lawyer, having served also as a judge for ten years and former head of the Human Rights Association of Syria. His extensive human rights efforts garnered him the Best Human Rights Activist of the Year Award in 2002 from the Arab Program for Human Rights Activists in Cairo, and the Guezen Medal presented by the Netherlands in 2006. Mr. Al-Maleh’s work, however, has led to frequent harassment by government officials and detentions for such charges as “having insulted the president.”

On October 12, 2009, Mr. Al-Maleh appeared on the Barada Television Channel to speak out against several government abuses—in particular, its arrest of his client, Muhannad Al-Hassani, the recent crack-down on pro-democracy groups like the Damascus Declaration, its unjustified perpetual declaration of martial law, and its suspension of the Syrian Constitution. Two days after his television appearance, Syrian authorities took Mr. Al-Maleh into custody. Following a trial that flagrantly violated international standards for due process, he was sentenced to three years in prison.

On January 27, 2011, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found the government’s detention of Mr. Al-Maleh to be in violation of international law, finding that “Mr. Al-Maleh was arrested and convicted due to exercise of his right to freedom of expression.”

Mr. Al-Maleh was released one day after Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad granted amnesty to many prisoners for crimes committed before March 7, 2011. The international community must now press the Syrian government to release Muhannad Al-Hassani.

Freedom Now, a prisoner of conscience advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C., worked on behalf of Haitham Al-Maleh and continues to call for the release of Muhannad Al-Hassani.

###

1750 K Street, NW, Suite 350 • Washington, D.C. 20006 • +1 (202) 223-3733 • www.freedom-now.org

Our mission is to free prisoners of conscience through focused legal, political and public relations advocacy efforts.