

THE OBSERVATORY

for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

L'OBSERVATOIRE

pour la Protection des Défenseurs
des Droits de l'Homme

EL OBSERVATORIO

para la Protección de los Defensores
de Derechos Humanos

PRESS RELEASE

ISRAEL/OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY: Serious violations of freedom of association and movement

Paris – Geneva, September 19, 2007 - The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), expresses its deepest concern regarding the closure of more than a hundred NGOs as well as concerning the violation of the freedom of movement of Mr. **Raji Sourani**, the Director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR).

According to the information received by the PCHR, on August 28, 2007, the Interior Minister of the Palestinian Government in Ramallah decided to dissolve 103 NGOs that had applied for re-registration, on the basis of a decree issued by President Mahmoud Abbas on June 14, 2007¹, which stipulates that all non-governmental organisations must reapply for registration, and which seriously increases the powers of the Ministry of Interior in terms of NGO-closure. In the present situation, the Interior Minister alleged that the 103 organisations had committed “legal, administrative or financial violations of Law n°1 of the Year 2000 on Benevolent societies and non-governmental institutions”. Out of these 103 organisations, 56 have already been closed down.

Furthermore, on August 29, 2007, the Observatory was informed that Mr. Sourani was prevented by the Israeli authorities to travel outside the Gaza Strip to attend the “UN Conference of Civil Society in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace” held at the European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium, on August 30 and 31, 2007. Mr. Sourani had to chair one of the conference sessions and to present a paper entitled *Enforcement of International Law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: The Only Real Roadmap for Peace*. This refusal follows a long list of restrictions to Mr. Sourani's freedom of movement. Over the past months, the PCHR director has indeed received tens of invitations from international NGOs, United Nations bodies and other international organisations, Ministries of Foreign Affairs, but has systematically been prevented from travelling.

The Observatory expresses its deep concern with the Palestinian and Israeli governments' strategies to crackdown on independent civil society, putting at risk the continuity of the work and very existence of some human rights organisations and defenders.

The Observatory calls the Palestinian authorities to abrogate the decree and to conform, in any circumstances, with the constitutional right to establish civil society organisations and international standards regarding freedom of association, in particular the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 20) and those of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which article 5b states that “for the purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, everyone has the right, individually and in association with others at national and international levels, to form, join and participate in non-governmental organisations, associations or groups”.

¹ This decree contradicts the right to establish organisations guaranteed by article 26 of the Amended Basic Law for 2003, stating Palestinians' right to “Establish unions, associations, federations, clubs, and public organizations in accordance with the law”.

See Press Release of the Observatory, *New decree seriously infringes freedom of association*, issued on June 26, 2007.

The Observatory further demands that the Israeli authorities refrain from restricting the freedom of movement of human rights defenders, as their work is essential to the development of a culture of peace and dialogue. In this regard, the Israeli authorities should comply with Article 9.4 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which provides that “everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to unhindered access to and communication with international bodies with general or special competence to receive and consider communications on matters of human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

The Observatory also calls the Palestinian and Israeli authorities to publicly recognise the role of independent human rights organisations and defenders in the prevention of conflicts and the establishment of peace, and to keep civil society out of the current crisis, preserving its independence, and ensuring the continuity of its work.

Finally, the Observatory urges the European Union to grant particular attention to the impact of the current crisis on the work of independent human rights organisations and to the protection of human rights defenders, in accordance with the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.

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