

Algeria: Absurd conviction of journalist Adlène Mellah must be overturned

Algeria's Court of Appeal must end the ordeal of the journalist, Adlène Mellah, who was jailed simply for covering a peaceful public gathering last month, said Amnesty International today ahead of his appeal hearing on 23 January.

Adlène Mellah, director of news websites *Algerie direct* et *Dzair Press* has been held in solitary confinement since he was jailed in El Harrach prison on 11 December 2018.

"It is outrageous that a journalist has been imprisoned simply for carrying out his work and exercising his rights to freedom of expression. The authorities must overturn Adlène Mellah's conviction and drop all the charges against him in this case immediately," said Heba Morayef, Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

"Adlène Mellah's case sends an alarming message about the state of media freedom in Algeria today. Journalists must be allowed to carry out their work free from harassment or intimidation, without fear of being arrested by the authorities."

Adlène was arrested while covering a protest of 200 people in Algiers on 9 December. The demonstration was held in solidarity with the imprisoned singer, Rada Hmimid, known by the stage name Reda City 16. On 25 December, the court of Bab El Oued sentenced Adlène to a year in jail and a 100,000 dinar (around US\$843) fine on charges of "rebellion" and "non-armed gathering".

A lawyer present at the trial told Amnesty International that the prosecution's only evidence against Adlène was his presence at the protest.

In a [video](#) of the protest, a police officer is seen telling Adlène to leave the protest. Shortly afterwards, he grabs Adlène by his arm, pushes him and says that public gatherings are illegal. Algerian authorities maintain a *de facto* ban on protests in Algiers under an unpublished decree from 2001.

Adlène was arrested along with two protesters, Abdelaziz Laadjal and Abdelhafid Benekrouche, who were released later that day. Adlène has been detained since.

In a court [session](#) on 18 December, the group of more than 20 lawyers who represent Adlène decided to withdraw and leave the courtroom as a sign of protest against what they said was the "deliberate intention" of the judge to hold an unfair trial.

Prolonged solitary confinement amounting to torture

Since his arrest, Adlène has been detained in solitary confinement, according to two of his lawyers. He is currently held alone in his cell and even during his courtyard breaks, he is alone apart from prison staff. Lack of meaningful contact with other detainees for at least 22 hours a day for more than 15 days constitutes prolonged solitary confinement, which amounts to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading

treatment, under the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Mandela Rules).

To protest the verdict, Mellah began a hunger strike on 26 December, the day after he was convicted. According to his lawyer Zoubida Assoul, Adlène [had lost at least 14 kilograms](#) as of 15 January. Another lawyer who visited him on 20 January told Amnesty International that after a visit from his family, Adlène had agreed to take serums containing salt and glucoses as well as vitamins.

One of his lawyers also told Amnesty International that Adlène was already very weak after reporting torture during his previous imprisonment. The Gendarmerie brigade of Bab Jdid in Algiers arrested him on 22 October 2018 on charges of "blackmail" and "harm to privacy".

Adlène told Amnesty International that he was beaten and waterboarded by gendarmerie officers who also placed a cloth doused in bleach into his mouth three times. A Court provisionally released him on 22 November 2018 but the authorities failed to order an investigation into his torture claims.

"The Algerian authorities must immediately quash the conviction against Adlène Mellah and free him and all other peaceful protesters, human rights activists and journalists prosecuted or detained simply for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly," said Heba Morayef.

Adlène's arrest and conviction comes as part of a broader crackdown against freedom of expression in Algeria that intensified in October 2018, when at least seven journalists and six activists were arrested and detained in connection with their journalism under penal code provisions.