

URGENT ACTION

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ON TRIAL

On 15 December, human rights defenders Sherifa Riahi, Yadh Bousselmi and Mohamed Joo will face criminal trial before the Tunis Court of First Instance on bogus charges related to their work for Terre d'Asile Tunisie, the local branch of a French NGO that provides assistance to refugees and migrants. They have been held in arbitrary pretrial detention since their arrest in May 2024. Authorities also arrested Imen Ouardani at the same time, a former local official who stands accused in the same trial for her collaboration with the NGO. The human rights defenders and NGO workers were targeted as part of a broader crackdown on civil society supporting refugees and migrants, fuelled by racist and xenophobic rhetoric. Tunisian authorities must immediately release them and drop all charges against them as they are detained solely for carrying out their human rights work.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

President of the Republic Kais Saied

Route de la Goulette

Site archéologique de Carthage, Tunisie

Email: contact@carthage.tn

X: @TnPresidency – [Facebook](#)

Your Excellency,

I write to you to express my grave concern over the unjust prosecution and arbitrary detention of human rights defenders and staff members of from Terre d'Asile Tunisie, the Tunisian branch of French NGO France Terre d'Asile; Sherifa Riahi, Yadh Bousselmi and Mohamed Joo, and Imen Ouardani, former deputy mayor of the eastern city of Sousse whose trial will open on 15 December 2025. They have been held in arbitrary pre-trial detention since May 2024, on charges that are not recognized under international law as offenses since they are related to their legitimate work assisting refugees and migrants. Tunisia is party to the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols, which set out precise standards for the definition of human smuggling and trafficking, exempting human rights and humanitarian work.

Authorities are prosecuting Sherifa Riahi, Yadh Bousselmi and Mohamed Joo together with three other Terre d'Asile staff for their work. They are also prosecuting Imen Ouardani along with 16 former municipality officials and employees for their collaboration with the NGO, specifically in relation to the opening of a Terre d'Asile facility in a municipal building. In closing the investigation, the investigating judge cited an alleged "European-backed civil society plan to promote the social and economic integration of irregular migrants into Tunisia and their permanent settlement" as the basis for the charges. Their detention and prosecution violate their rights to freedom of association and expression, criminalizes legitimate collaboration between civil society and local authorities, and contravenes Tunisia's international obligations towards refugees and migrants by hampering protection and assistance work.

The prison administration is also hindering Sherifa Riahi's access to her children, including a baby and a four-year-old son. On 27 June, the Court of Manouba ordered the prison to allow visits weekly. However, the prison administration refuses to recognize the court's ruling and allows her visits only every two weeks.

I urge you to immediately release Sherifa Riahi, Yadh Bousselmi, Mohamed Joo and Imen Ouardani and drop all charges against them. Pending this, the prison administration must respect the court's decision to allow Sherifa Riahi more visits for her children and to respect their best interest. I also call on your government to cease targeting human rights defenders solely for their human rights work.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

From 3 May 2024 onwards, the Tunisian authorities launched an unprecedented [crackdown](#) on NGOs working with refugees and migrants, raiding at least three [organizations](#) and arresting or investigating the staff of at least 15 organizations. This took place in parallel to [a wider crackdown](#) on refugee and migrant rights, after a year of racist and xenophobic official statements, often from President Kais Saied, [claiming](#) the presence of Black Africans in Tunisia was part of a conspiracy: "Whoever is behind this phenomenon is human trafficking and at the same time claims to be defending human rights." A few days after the first arrests, on 6 May, the president described staff in migration organizations as "traitors" and "[foreign] agents" seeking the "settlement" of migrants. On 7 May, a Tunis prosecutor [announced](#) an investigation against NGOs for "providing financial support to illegal migrants".

Terre d'Asile Tunisie is a registered NGO who operates transparently, providing essential assistance to vulnerable refugees and migrants in cooperation with local and national authorities, including the Sousse municipality. It was among the first NGOs targeted. On 4 and 5 May 2024, police searched their offices and summoned its employees. On 7, 8 and 13 May respectively, police arrested and detained Sherifa Riahi, Yadh Bousselmi and Mohamed Joo, respectively former director, director and financial and administrative director of the NGO. Police also arrested two former officials of the municipality of Sousse, including former deputy mayor and civil society activist Imen Ouardani on 11 May. On 16 May, a Tunis investigative judge placed them in pretrial detention pending investigation for "assisting illegal migrants" (Articles 38 to 43 of Law 40 of 1975 concerning Passports and Travel Documents), abusing a position as public official "to obtain an unjustified advantage or to cause harm to the administration" (Article 96 of the Penal Code), money laundering, fraud and attacking a person or property. Those investigated are the NGO's legal representative, six Terre d'Asile former and current employees and 17 former municipality officials and employees. The judge ordered a freeze on the organization's and their personal bank accounts pending investigation and a financial expertise to investigate "unjustified and unknown revenue", which concluded on 8 January 2025 that there were no irregularities. Since May 2024, authorities rejected at least three requests for conditional release.

On 28 January 2025, the judge concluded his investigation and referred the case to trial solely for six people – Sherifa Riahi, Yadh Bousselmi, Mohamed Joo, a fourth Terre d'asile employee, Imen Ouardani and another former local official, after dropping several criminal charges including money laundering and abusing a public official's position. Following the prosecution's appeal, on 26 February 2025, an indictment chamber ruled to prosecute the six Terre d'Asile employees and 17 municipality officials and employees for "forming an alliance" to "shelter individuals entering or leaving the Tunisian territory illegally" (Articles 39 and 41 of Law 40 of 1975), "knowingly directly or indirectly helping or attempting to facilitate the entry, exit, movement or irregular stay of a foreigner in Tunisia" (Article 25 of Law 68-7 of 1968 relating to the Condition of Foreigners), and abusing a public official's position. On 8 October 2025, the Court of Cassation rejected the appeal of the indictment, maintaining all charges against the defendants. The charges are solely based on the work of Terre d'Asile and their partnership with the Sousse municipality to support refugees and migrants. The authorities' claimed that baseless administrative procedural irregularities in the signature of the partnership demonstrated the illegal exploitation of a public building in implementation of "a [foreign] plan to enable irregular migrants to move around, reside and settle in Tunisia." The chamber also ruled to prosecute Mohamed Joo for "fabricating, under the name of a civil servant, a certificate of good conduct or any other document likely to procure employment, credit or assistance" (Article 199 of the Penal Code) without basis. Defendants appealed the indictment.

The detention of Sherifa Riahi and the authorities hindering her children's visits raise additional concerns regarding discrimination based on gender and parental status, as well as the respect of the best interest of the children. She is permitted weekly visits, conducted via a glass wall and an intercom, thus not allowing her to hold her baby and her four-year-old son. During her first year of detention, prison administration has only allowed Sherifa Riahi three open visits in a room allowing for direct physical contact, with delays of up to three months to obtain authorization. Since May 2025, they have been more responsive allowing her a visit every two weeks. According to the Bangkok Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners, prison visits with children should allow for open contact and women prisoners should be given the maximum possible opportunity and facilities to meet with their children.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Arabic, French, English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 24 May 2026

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Sherifa Riahi Sahaly (She/Her), Yadh Bousselmi (He/Him), Mohamed Joo (He/Him), Imen Ouardani (She/her)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde30/9393/2025/en/>