

Concern at Prison Unrest Reports

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Reports of unrest and a fire at the Saidnaya military prison underscore the need for more transparency about the conditions in Syrian prisons, human rights activists and family members of prisoners say.

Numerous reports surfaced this week of disturbances at the jail, northeast of Damascus, where many political prisoners are held, but few details have been confirmed.

Families were barred from visiting prisoners from late March until last week. The parents of prisoners who visited them earlier this week said they looked well and the situation appeared normal. At the supervised meetings, the prisoners told them there had been a fire but did not provide any more details.

Family members of people convicted by the State Security Court are allowed visits, but those who are standing trial are not allowed visitors. Defence lawyers are not allowed in to the Saidnaya prison. In 2005, visitors were barred for about a year after one prisoner killed another.

About 20 relatives of Kurdish prisoners were detained for an hour on April 6, after protesting when their relatives did not show up for trial at the State Security Court in Damascus. The court postponed all trials scheduled for that day until May.

The government has not commented on or released any information about the reports of unrest.

Human rights activist Mohammad al-Abdullah, whose brother Omar is serving a five-year sentence in the prison for his affiliation with a democratic youth movement, said, "The policy in dealing with this prison is to always darken what is going happening there."

Abdullah, who spent two months in solitary confinement in Saidnaya in 2006 and now lives in Beirut, said activists and family members had a the right to know what went on at the prison.

"Just because it is a facility for political prisoners doesn't mean that it needs to be a prison of secret and mysteries. They have rights as prisoners under international conventions," he said.

The prison, which opened in 1987, holds an estimated 1,000 prisoners, according to rights groups, including Kurds, Islamists and democratic activists.

A Syrian human rights observer said the lack of information "is not unusual", as the government usually remains tight-lipped about human rights issues and does not acknowledge that it has political prisoners.

The observer, who is investigating the reports by talking to families and human rights groups, said details of events in the prison were murky, although more were likely to emerge from visitors in the coming weeks

and months.

He dismissed as “exaggerated” a report by the opposition Movement for Justice and Democracy that a “massacre” had occurred in which prisoners were burned alive by guards.

The Kurdish website Roj reported on April 8 that Kurdish and Arab prisoners declared a “popular rebellion” after three people were killed during a Kurdish new year celebration on March 20.

In a statement released earlier this week, lawyer Muhammad al-Hasani, head of the Syrian Organisation for Human Rights, said his group could not confirm the reports it had received that conditions were deteriorating in the Saidnaya prison.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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