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ARTICLE 19

PRESS RELEASE

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Syria: Crackdown on political debate

ARTICLE 19 condemns the recent crackdown on political opponents and dissenting voices in Syria, and calls upon the Syrian government to stop immediately this attack on freedom of expression.

On 7 January 2008, the Syrian authorities arrested opposition activist Mohammed Haji Darwish as part of a crackdown on signatories to the 'Damascus Declaration'. Darwish's arrest brings to nine the number of signatories arrested since December 2007. The Damascus Declaration, issued in 2005, calls for democracy and political change in the country. It is backed by activists from different political standpoints and members of banned opposition parties.

The arrests follow the formation, in December 2007, of a National Council charged with implementing the Damascus Declaration. In December alone, the authorities arrested more than 40 members of the Damascus Declaration, 33 of whom were released within a few days.

"The Damascus Declaration is a legitimate form of expression, protected under international law. Instead of attacking and silencing dissenting voices, the Syrian authorities should welcome such much needed democratic debate and initiate a dialogue with civil society," said Dr. Agnès Callamard, Executive Director, ARTICLE 19.

Earlier this month, the Syrian authorities arrested writer and journalist Mr. Fayeza Sara, also a signatory to the Damascus Declaration. His arrest came shortly after his condemnation in a TV program on 1 January 2008 of arrests by the Syrian authorities of other members of the Damascus Declaration.

ARTICLE 19 calls upon the Syrian authorities to stop these attacks on freedom of expression and to release Mohammed Darwish, Fayeza Sara, other Damascus Declaration detainees and others detained solely for peacefully expressing their legitimate views. Syria has an obligation, under Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and Article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), to which it is a State Party, to protect rather than undermine the right to freedom of expression.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.