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First UA: 54/25 Index: MDE 30/9393/2025 Tunisia of May 20, 2025

TUNISIA

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ARRESTED WITHOUT CAUSE

In early May 2024, Tunisian authorities arrested four people without a valid reason. Among them was Sherifa Riahi, taken from her home while on maternity leave and caring for her newborn baby. They also arrested Yadh Bousselmi and Mohamed Joo, former and current staff at Terre d'Asile Tunisie, a group that helps refugees and migrants. A few days later, Imen Ouardani, a former local official who had worked with the organization, was also arrested.

These arrests are part of a wider attack on civil society groups that support refugees and migrants. This crackdown is fueled by racist and anti-migrant messages. All four people remain in jail, even though they haven't been convicted of any crime.

They should be freed now, and all charges against them must be dropped.

Write to the President of Tunisia urging him to:

- Immediately release Sherifa Riahi, Yadh Bousselmi, Mohamed Joo, and Imen Ouardani and drop all charges against them.
- Until they are released, respond without delay to Sherifa Riahi's requests to see her children and ensure her children's best interests are respected.
- Stop targeting human rights defenders simply for exercising their right to stand up for others.
- Respect the right of all individuals and organizations to support refugees, migrants, and other vulnerable communities without fear of punishment.

Write to:

President of the Republic Kais Saied

Email: contact@carthage.tn

X: @TnPresidency

Salutation: *Your Excellency:*

And copy:

His Excellency Lassaad Boutara

Ambassador

Embassy of the Republic of Tunisia

515 O'Connor Street

Ottawa, ON K1S 3P8

Tel: (613) 237-0330, -0332 Fax: (613) 237-7939

Email: tunisianembassycanada@diplomatie.gov.tn

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Starting May 3, 2024, Tunisian authorities launched a sweeping crackdown on NGOs aiding refugees and migrants. At least three organizations were raided, and staff from 15 groups faced arrest or investigation. This followed a year of inflammatory, racist statements from top officials, including President Kais Saied, who portrayed Black African migrants as part of a conspiracy. On May 6, he labeled migration workers as “traitors” and “foreign agents.” The next day, a prosecutor announced a probe into NGOs accused of financially supporting “illegal migrants.”

Among the first NGOs targeted was Terre d’Asile Tunisie, the Tunisian branch of a French migrant rights group. On May 4 and 5, 2024, police searched its offices and summoned staff. Arrests followed: Sherifa Riahi (former director) on May 7, Yadh Bousselmi (current director) on May 8, and Mohamed Joo (financial director) on May 13. On May 11, authorities arrested two former Sousse municipal officials, including Imen Ouardani. On May 16, all were placed in pretrial detention on charges including “assisting illegal migrants,” fraud, abuse of office, and money laundering. A financial expert later found no wrongdoing, but authorities denied at least three requests for conditional release.

On January 28, 2025, a judge referred six individuals—four Terre d’Asile staff and two former officials—to trial after dropping some charges, including money laundering. The case escalated on February 26, 2025, when an appeals court expanded the indictment to include 23 people. They were charged with forming an alliance to aid irregular migration and misusing public property. Authorities claimed that normal administrative procedures masked a plot to “settle” migrants in Tunisia. Charges against Mohamed Joo also included fabricating official documents, though no evidence was presented. All defendants are appealing the indictment.

Sherifa Riahi’s case raises serious human rights concerns. Detained while nursing a newborn, she is allowed only one weekly visit—through a glass barrier and intercom. Since June 2024, she has had just three physical contact visits with her children, with delays of up to three months for approval. These restrictions violate international standards like the UN’s Bangkok Rules, which call for open, frequent contact between imprisoned mothers and their children. The treatment suggests discrimination based on gender and parental status, and it ignores the best interests of the children.

Please take action as soon as possible until November 10, 2025. The UA will be duly updated should there be the need for further action.