

URGENT ACTION

IRAQ/KRG: JOURNALISTS MUST BE RELEASED IMMEDIATELY

On 16 February, the 2nd Erbil Criminal Court, in the Kurdish Region of Iraq's capital, sentenced activists and journalists Sherwan Sherwani, Guhdar Zebari, Hariwan Issa, Ayaz Karam and Shvan Saeed to six years in prison following an unfair trial, based on trumped-up charges of “destabilizing the security and stability of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I)”. The five journalists are now on hunger strike as they await the appeal verdict expected to take place by 16 March. They must be immediately and unconditionally released.

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

Dr. Dindar Zebari

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Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Dear Dr. Zebari,

*On 16 February, the Erbil Criminal Court sentenced activists and journalists **Sherwan Sherwani, Guhdar Zebari, Hariwan Issa, Ayaz Karam** and **Shvan Saeed** to six years in prison after a flagrantly unfair trial mired with serious allegations of torture and other ill-treatment, and based on apparently trumped-up charges of “destabilizing the security and stability of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I)” under Article 1 of Law No. 21 (2003). They are now awaiting the appeal verdict, expected to be delivered by 16 March.*

Since their sentencing, the five journalists have been on hunger strike to protest their detention conditions. According to information available to Amnesty International, they are detained in overcrowded cells with no room to sleep, stand or walk, together with over 100 prisoners. In such conditions, the journalists and other detainees are particularly vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19.

Members of the Kurdish security forces [otherwise known as Asayish] arrested Sherwan Sherwani on 7 October 2020 in Erbil, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's capital, and the other 4 journalists- Guhdar Zebari, Hariwan Issa, Ayaz Karam and Shvan Saeed - on 22 October 2020 in Duhok, another main city in the KRG, in relation to their involvement in anti-government protests over unpaid wages and corruption. Throughout their detention, the five journalists were forcibly disappeared, some for more than three months. They had very limited access to their lawyers and family members. The five journalists told either their lawyers or family members that they had been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment. During the court hearing, all five journalists said that they had been forced to sign “confessions” under duress, but the court dismissed those claims. In addition, the hearing was held in closed session, as security forces barred the entrance, including to immediate family members.

In light of the above, I urge you to immediately and unconditionally release Sherwan Sherwani, Guhdar Zebari, Hariwan Issa, Ayaz Karam and Shvan Saeed, immediately take all steps to ensure their unjust conviction is overturned, and ensure a prompt and effective investigation into the allegations of torture and other ill-treatment with a view to holding perpetrators accountable and providing redress to them. Pending their release, I further urge you to ensure they have access to qualified health professionals providing health care in compliance with medical ethics, including the principles of confidentiality, autonomy, and informed consent and has unfettered access to their lawyers and family.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The Kurdish security forces Asayish [arrested](#) all five activists and journalists in October 2020 and were immediately charged with “being spies” and “destabilizing national security”. In the case documents made available to the lawyer, Sherwan Sherwani was accused of being a spy based on his activism and travel to attend journalism trainings abroad, including as a result of receiving payment of 5,000 USD from the American Bar Association. The lawyer was not able to review the case documents of the others.

KR-I Prime Minister Masrour Barzani had previously [claimed](#) the detainees were spies and saboteurs and accused them of working for foreign governments to plot terrorist attacks. Dr. Zebari, KRG’s Coordinator for International Advocacy, denied that the five activists and journalists were sentenced for their journalistic work.

According to information available to Amnesty International, Asayish forces raided the homes or place of work of all five journalists, arrested them and in some cases the arrests became brutal and inhumane. In one case, the Asayish pulled Guhdar Zebari from his bed, covered his eyes and handcuffed him without even presenting an arrest warrant. In another case, the Asayish and local Erbil police- arriving in six police cars and 4-wheel-drive cars- surrounded the home of Sherwan Sherwani at approximately 4:30pm on 7 October 2020, in the city of Erbil, and immediately trapped members of his family in a room in the house. Asayish members proceeded to raid Sherwan Sherwani’s home, confiscating electronics, including his laptop, camera, phone and documents before putting him in handcuffs. They held him at gun point and then dragged him out of the house.

Amnesty International has received a copy of the verdict which stated that all five men were sentenced to prison based on the provisions of Article 1 of Law No. 21 of 2003 issued by the Parliament of the Kurdistan Region and Articles 47, 48 and 49 of the Iraqi Penal Code. The court also decided to place them under police surveillance for a period of five years after the completion of their sentences, and to confiscate their mobile phones, laptops and cameras. Following the sentencing of the five journalists, the court issued an arrest warrant for the brother of Shvan Saeed, Ayhan Saeed. Two additional arrests warrants were also issued for journalist Difaa Harki and activist Qaidar Hussein. All three arrest warrants mention charges of national security under the Law 21.

Amnesty International has in the past [documented](#) the violent dispersal and mass and pre-emptive arrest of protesters in the KR-I and specifically in the governorate of Duhok. In January 2020 Asayish members carried out a wave of arrests in the governorate of Duhok, of tens of protesters, activists, journalists, and individuals who may have been bystanders during a protest. Asayish members also arrested a journalist and two online activists in the area of Baadre, Duhok governorate, who according to their relatives, were on their way to Duhok to join a peaceful gathering.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English, Kurdish and Arabic

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 23 APRIL 2021.

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

NAME AND PRONOUN: Sherwan Sherwani, Guhdar Zebari, Hariwan Issa, Ayaz Karam and Shvan Saeed (Him/His)

And copies to:

His Excellency Mr Mohammad Jaafar M Bakr Haidar Al-Sadr

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