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Activists from the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression are scheduled to appear before the Anti-Terrorism Court in Damascus.

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Source:

Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

The trial of five peaceful activists in Syria on “terrorism” charges tomorrow is further evidence of the increasing and systematic repression against anyone speaking out against human rights violations in the country, Amnesty International said.

Mazen Darwish, Hussein Gharir, Hani al-Zitani, Mansour al-Omari and Abd al-Rahman Hamada from the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), are scheduled to appear before the Anti-Terrorism Court in Damascus tomorrow.

“The Syrian government should not use its overbroad terrorism law to punish peaceful human rights activists for their legitimate work. The authorities must drop all charges against these five activists and release Mazen Darwish, Hussein Gharir and Hani al-Zitani immediately and unconditionally,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

Mazen Darwish, Hussein Gharir and Hani al-Zitani are still in detention while Mansour al-Omari and Abd al-Rahman Hamada were conditionally released in February this year but continue to be on trial.

During the trial, the judge will decide whether to uphold the charges brought against them by the Syrian Government's Air Force Intelligence and to proceed with the case.

The men were indicted in February this year and accused of "publicizing terrorist acts" under Article 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Law, enacted by President Bashar al-Assad in 2012. The law has been widely criticized by human rights groups due to its over-broad definition of "terrorism".

Charges against the activists include: publishing studies on the human rights situation in Syria and documenting names of those detained, disappeared, and killed in the context of the Syrian unrest.

If convicted, they may be imprisoned for up to 15 years.

The activists were detained by Syria's Air Force Intelligence over a year and a half ago and were held in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance for several months.

Amnesty International has learned that Hani al-Zitani, Mansour al-Omari and Abd al-Rahman Hamada were beaten with whips, sticks and electric shock rods during their mealtimes every day for a period of three months, while being held in military custody.

It understands that Mazen Darwish and Hussein Gharir were also tortured or otherwise ill-treated.

"The charges brought against the activists clearly violate their right to freedom of expression. We are also extremely worried for the physical and psychological well-being, given the treatment they have apparently been subjected to in detention and the length of their arbitrary imprisonment," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

According to information received by Amnesty International, political and other peaceful activists, including women detainees, are being tried before the Anti-Terrorism Court, which is believed to have been set up to target opposition members in the country.