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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

ISSUE

Canada remains concerned about reports of continuing violations of human rights in Syria, notably the large number of political prisoners, conditions of detention, including torture, and the lack of respect for due process of law (access a to lawyer, visiting rights, etc.). Over the last years some progress has been made, as witnessed by the continued release of political prisoners from Syrian jails and the permission, promised for implementation by the end of the year, for Syrian Jews to travel abroad.

BACKGROUND

Syrians live under an authoritarian regime. There is little sign of progress towards a freer political system through democratic elections. However, better respect for human rights questions might develop as a result of Syria's quest for better relations with the West, including Canada. The changing international political and economic environment is a challenge to the Ba'ath regime in Syria.

In 1992, hundreds of political and other prisoners were quietly released and, in 1993, half of the estimated 7000 remaining political prisoners were also released.

In April 1992, after years of unsuccessful representations, Syrian officials suddenly informed the leaders of the Syrian Jewish community that they would facilitate the travel abroad of Syrian Jews as family groups. From April to October 1992, some 2600 Syrian Jews took advantage of this new policy, obtained exit permits and left. But since October 1992, in spite of repeated assurances from Syrian officials, and this as recently as November and mid-December, only a very limited number of Syrian Jews have been able to obtain the necessary exit permit. At the beginning of December, President Assad is reported to have said that, before the end of the year, exit permits could be granted to all remaining Syrian Jews wishing to travel.

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