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His Excellency Liamine Zeroual
President
La Presidence de la Republique
el-Mouradia
Algiers, Algeria

Dear Mr. President:

Our Association and its more than 348,000 member lawyers have a deep commitment to the preservation of the rule of law in the international community. In particular, we seek to encourage the maintenance of judicial systems which are independent from government interference, and which respect the independence of judges and lawyers in order to maintain internationally recognized standards of fairness and justice. These principles are embodied in a "Rule of Law Resolution" adopted by the Association's House of Delegates in February 1975.

Pursuant to that resolution, I am writing to you to express our deep concern regarding the detention of Mr. Rachid Mesli.

According to reports that we have received, Mr. Mesli, a member of the Algerian National Lawyers Union and the Algerian League to Defend Human Rights who has served as defense counsel for the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), was arrested on July 31, 1996. It is our understanding that he was held incommunicado for ten days before he was finally taken before a magistrate, at which time he was charged with associating with armed groups. Mr. Mesli was denied access to his counsel until August 15, 1996, at which point they reported him to be in poor physical condition, showing signs of abuse. We have been informed that Mr. Mesli is being prosecuted solely on account of his representation of the aforementioned proscribed organization.

These facts, if our information is correct, reflect serious violations of the rule of law in Algeria. The independence of judges and lawyers, which includes the ability of lawyers to represent their clients, is fundamental to maintaining the international norms of equal justice and due process enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other international human rights instruments.

The sole concern of the American Bar Association is for the maintenance of the rule of law in the international community and the elements necessary to sustain it. We agree that preservation of the security of the state and public order are responsibilities of any government, and are mindful of your country's problem with religious extremists. Nevertheless, these concerns cannot justify the imprisonment of Mr. Mesli for representing the FIS.

We respectfully urge that Mr. Mesli be released forthwith or, alternatively, be given a prompt and fair trial in accordance with international human rights norms.

Thank you for your consideration of these important matters. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



N. Lee Cooper

cc: The Honorable Madeleine Albright, United States Secretary of State
The Honorable Ronald Neumann, United States Ambassador to Algeria
His Excellency Ramtane Lamamra, Ambassador of Algeria to the United States
M. Ahmed Abbeche, Bâtonnier, Union Nationale des Barreaux Algeriens
M. Kamel Rezzag-Bara, President, Observatoire National des Droits de l'Homme,
Algiers
Mr. Desmond Fernando, President, International Bar Association, London
Mr. K.K. Venugopal, President, Union Internationale des Avocats, Paris
Mr. Bernard Vatier, Bâtonnier, Ordre des Avocats à la Cour de Paris