

Dr. Dindar Zebari

KRG Coordinator Office for International Advocacy
Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq
Email: dindar.zebari@gov.krd

Dear Dr. Zebari,

I am writing to demand the immediate release of journalists **Guhdar Zebari** and **Sherwan Sherwani**, who have been imprisoned since October 2020 following a grossly unfair trial. As their release dates became imminent, the prosecution charged them with additional spurious crimes intended to keep them behind bars. Before their arrest, Sherwani and Zebari's journalism focused on human rights, freedom of expression and corruption issues in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Zebari was scheduled for release on 16 August 2023, but was informed that day by the KR-I's primary security and intelligence agency, the Asayish, that he was being detained on new charges. He began a hunger strike on the same day and has been on hunger strike since. On 23 August 2023, the Asayish informed him that he was being charged for possession of an unlicensed weapon, in violation of Article 15 of Law No.2 which was passed in 2022. Zebari's lawyers told Amnesty International that security agents found an unlicensed antique hunting weapon in his sister's home at the time of his arrest, but the lawyers also noted that it was not illegal at that time for the weapon to be unlicensed.

Sherwani was scheduled for release on 9 September, but on 20 July, the Erbil Criminal Court sentenced him to an additional four years in prison on charges related to falsifying Zebari's signature on a petition to the Erbil Adult Reform Prison, where Sherwani and Zebari are currently being held, while Zebari was in solitary confinement. The petition requested that the prison authorities disregard a prior request for conditional release because they believed the request would be unlikely to succeed. At Sherwani's hearing, Zebari confirmed that he had given Sherwani consent to sign the petition on his behalf.

Both journalists have been imprisoned since 7 October 2020 and were sentenced in February 2021 to 6 years imprisonment along with three other activists on charges of espionage based on overbroad and vaguely defined laws. Their trial was marred by serious fair trial and due process violations. In February 2022, KR-I President Nechirvan Barzani commuted half of Sherwani's sentence and sixty per cent of the sentences of Zebari and the three activists. The other three activists, Hariwan Issa, Ayaz Karam and Shvan Saeed, were released in March of this year.

I urge you to immediately release Sherwan Sherwani and Guhdar Zebari, respect the right to freedom of expression and ensure that journalists are able to do their jobs without fear of arbitrary arrest, prosecution and imprisonment.

Yours sincerely,