

## PRESS RELEASE

### Toxic Legacy: The Human Cost of Pollution in Gabès

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For years, the people of Gabès in Tunisia have been exposed to toxic pollution, environmental destruction, and dangerous living conditions, all in violation of their fundamental rights. The right to a healthy, clean, and safe environment, formally recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in 2022 as a universal human right, is being systematically denied.

At the core of this crisis is the chemical complex operated by the GCT (Groupe Chimique Tunisien). Every single day, the GCT releases nearly 16,000 tonnes of industrial waste into the Gulf of Gabès, including phosphogypsum contaminated with heavy metals. This pollution has wiped out marine life in large parts of the coastline, devastated the local fishing economy, and destroyed a centuries-old balance between people and their environment.

This degradation directly undermines:

- **The right to health:** Local residents report rising rates of respiratory illnesses, skin diseases, and cancer. A 2018 study by the European Commission found that 95% of air pollution in Gabès comes from the GCT, including substances such as sulfur oxide and ammonia.
- **The right to food and water:** The oasis's water reserves are being drained by industrial deep well drilling, contributing to soil acidification and declining agricultural yields. Families are losing their livelihoods — and their ability to feed themselves.
- **The right to life and safety:** In 2021, an explosion in the industrial zone claimed six lives. In 2023, 2,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate mysteriously went missing, raising fears of another deadly incident. Industrial negligence continues to put entire communities at risk.
- **The right to participation and access to information:** Despite years of mobilization by local civil society — especially the “**Stop Pollution**” movement — demands for transparency, accountability, and sustainable development have been ignored or met with token gestures. People are being excluded from decisions that affect their lives and futures.

Gabès is also a case study in environmental injustice. Communities already marginalized by geography and policy are being forced to choose between their health and their income. The economic reliance on the GCT creates a climate of fear and dependency. Job security is pitted against basic rights, a trade-off that no human being should ever be asked to make.

In March 2025, President Kais Saïed visited Gabès and called for waste removal and accountability. While over 1,000 tonnes of waste were cleared in one day, these actions remain cosmetic unless followed by deep, structural reform. Real justice means enforcing environmental standards, holding polluters accountable, and centering communities in decision-making.

This ongoing environmental crisis has sparked repeated peaceful protests. Among the activists is Dali R'timi, a young man from Gabès who, along with two others, was arrested during a

peaceful demonstration calling for the closure of polluting chemical units and the protection of water resources. The protesters were accused under articles 79 and 127 of the Tunisian Penal Code of “participation in a gathering with intent to disturb public order” and “aggravated violence against a public official.” Witnesses report that security forces assaulted the protesters during their arrests, which followed a series of demonstrations highlighting the deepening ecological and social crisis in Gabès.

The arrests of Dali and his fellow activists reveal the harsh reality facing civil society in Gabès: demands for environmental justice are met with repression rather than response. Communities are caught in a painful dilemma—forced to choose between their health and their livelihoods in an economy dominated by the very industries causing harm.

At *Avocats Sans Frontières*, we affirm that environmental rights are inseparable from human rights. No one should have to risk their health, safety, or dignity in the name of economic progress.

Environmental destruction is not just a policy failure — it is a violation of rights. The people are not collateral damage. They are rights-holders, and they deserve justice.