“She’s Got AIDS” in Tunisia

January 28, 2011 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

My favorite NPR show *On The Media* recently aired a segment interviewing Lina Ben Mhenni, a blogger in Tunisia. She writes the blog A Tunisian Girl, which was banned in her country. In the wake of the protests, her blog can now be read by her fellow Tunisians.

Here’s an excerpt of her interview with *OTM* co-host Brooke Gladstone:

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Have you personally had any direct contact with the Tunisian police?

LINA BEN MHENNI: [LAUGHS] They are following me every day, so yes, yes.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Have they spoken to you?

LINA BEN MHENNI: Yes, they were trying to harass me verbally. For example - this is very funny - one day I was going out to buy some coffee and they, they just want to provoke me, so one looked to the other, two police officers, said, look, this is Lina, she was in the United States, and she’s got AIDS.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Sh - they said you had AIDS?

LINA BEN MHENNI: Yes, just to bother me, to drive me

crazy. But I never talked to them, I never answered them.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Are you experiencing then a sense of freedom now that didn’t exist before the protests began earlier this month?

LINA BEN MHENNI: Yes, now journalists are walking more freely. For example, now journalists can take pictures easily in the streets, and even the official medias are now interviewing dissidents, and all the people are invited to speak on Tunisian TVs, on radio stations.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Even you.

LINA BEN MHENNI: [LAUGHS] Even me, yes.

I’m optimistic that her story will have a happy ending. What she happened to reveal, as an aside in an interview, about the use of AIDS as a taunt in Tunisia, however, leaves me feeling quite the opposite of optimistic about the state of HIV stigma around the world.

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