



For immediate release

Growing international concern over press freedom in Yemen

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ARTICLE 19 is deeply concerned over the Yemeni authorities' decision this week to cancel the licenses of three independent newspapers, the English-language weekly *Yemen Observer*; the independent weekly tabloid *Rai al-A'am* and the privately owned weekly tabloid *Al-Hurriya* (Freedom), in an apparent move against the newspapers' decisions to reproduce the controversial Danish cartoons.

"We are deeply saddened by the silencing of independent voices that intended to inform the Yemeni public" said Dr. Agnès Callamard, executive Director of ARTICLE 19. ***"This is particularly troubling in the run-up to the 2006 elections and underlines the urgent need for a reform of the Yemeni Press Law."***

The move is reportedly a response to the newspapers' decisions to reproduce the controversial cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) originating with Denmark's *Jylland-Posten*. Article 103 of Yemen's 1990 press law prohibits publications which "prejudice the Islamic faith and its lofty principles". Yet, all three newspapers accompanied the images with editorials explicitly denouncing and condemning them. The *Yemen Observer* printed large black crosses over some of the cartoons and edited them to blur the original images, in protest against their existence. In the accompanying article, the newspaper reiterated its condemnation of the drawings and of any deliberate intentions to insult Islam, while also calling upon Muslims to engage in dialogue rather than violence, in order to promote a better understanding of Islam in the outside world.

"They want to close the newspaper in response to our efforts and continuous calls for understanding, tolerance and accepting the apologies of the Danish people, officials, and editors. We have received dozens of apologies from Denmark," wrote the *Yemen Observer's* editorial team, expressing their frustration that the newspaper was *"revoked for being fair."* The *Yemen Observer's* efforts to promote a better understanding of Islam represent an attempt to enhance the reputation of the religion in the outside world, rather than to prejudice it. In a clear violation of the 1990 Press Law, under whose terms publication licences can only be revoked by court order, the *Yemen Observer's* licence was cancelled prior to any judicial proceedings. The owner was not given any details of the legal basis for the cancellation.

Yemen has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and is legally required, under international law, to respect the right of its citizens to freedom of expression as guaranteed under Article 19 of the ICCPR. Licensing requirements for the

press are generally considered to be inconsistent with this guarantee, particularly if they grant the executive discretion to suspend or close publications.¹

Yemen's efforts to create a diverse and pluralistic media environment were previously cited as an example for the region. The latest measures taken by the Government cast fresh doubts on the country's continued commitment to its reform agenda, and send a negative message to the international community on Yemen's commitment to protect human rights and respect its international obligation.

The Republic of Yemen has in recent years worked closely with various international partners including ARTICLE 19, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the UNDP and the German and British governments to further democratic reform. A number of these efforts have focused on enabling a diverse and pluralistic media environment that adheres to international standards and allows for genuine contestation of the political status quo, as necessary in a democracy.

ARTICLE 19 calls on the Yemeni government to:

- Suspend all legal proceedings against the *Yemen Observer*, *Al-Rai Al-A'am* and *Al-Hurriya* newspapers immediately and reinstate their licences.
- Accelerate the process of media law reform in close cooperation with the Yemeni Journalists' Syndicate, including progressive changes to the Press and Publications Law of 1990.
- Take all possible measures to ensure that the independent press is able to perform its functions during the upcoming campaigns period.

NOTES TO EDITORS

- **For more information: please contact Laura Salama, Middle East Program Officer, Tel: +44-207-278-9292, Email: laura@article19.org**
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent non-profit organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.
- Last June, ARTICLE 19 undertook a mission to Yemen to advise the government and civil society on how to bring the 1990 Law on Press and Publications in line with international law and best practices. Our key recommendations included the abolition of all licensing schemes requiring official permission for the operation of print media outlets. The full report can be viewed at <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/analysis/draft-yemen-press-and-publications-law.pdf>.

¹ The UN, OAS and OSCE special mandates on freedom of expression have declared that "[i]mposing special registration requirements on the print media is unnecessary and may be abused and should be avoided. Registration systems which allow for discretion to refuse ... are particularly problematical." Joint Declaration, adopted 18 December 2003. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/crkrh>.