



PRESS RELEASE

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Egypt: assault on freedom of expression

ARTICLE 19 and Index on Censorship are alarmed by the continuing assault on press freedom in Egypt. Next week, no less than three cases will come to trial. All three represent a serious infringement of the right to free expression. It is the culmination of a year-long campaign of intimidation against journalists and bloggers.

Howaida Taha, al Jazeera journalist, was detained in January 2007, while making a documentary on torture in Egypt. Her case comes up on 3 December. The documentary was broadcasted on Al Jazeera in April and has become a significant testimony of the violations committed by the country's security apparatus. Ms Taha was sentenced in absentia on the 2 May by al Nozha Felonies Court in Egypt to six months in prison and hard labour under Article 80 and 178 of the penal code, which prohibit 'acts that intend to harm national interests' and 'possessing and giving pictures and recorded material that undermine the image of the country by presenting material contrary to the reality or presenting inappropriate scenes'.

On 5 December, **Ibrahim Issa**, editor-in-chief of *al Dustour*, will face trial in *Algalaa'* Court. In September 2007, Mr Issa was charged with publishing reports 'likely to disturb public security and damage the public interest' in respect of articles published in *al- Dustor* about President Mubarak's state of health.

The third case will be heard on 8 December and threatens the existence of a number of blogs, news websites, and the websites of local and international human rights organizations – including **Ifex**, **Index on Censorship**, and the **Arabic Network for Human Rights**. Earlier this year, Judge Abd al-Fattah Mourad filed a lawsuit against a number of human rights NGOs and blogs, describing them as terrorist and accusing them of harming the reputation of Egypt and Arab rulers and of posting information which insult the President. He called for those websites to be blocked.

The Arabic Network for Human Right believes that the case against them is a response to a law suit that they have filed against Judge Mourad for plagiarism.

In addition to these three cases, three journalists from the *al Wafd* newspaper, including the editor, will have their appeal heard in 2008. They were convicted on 24 September of undermining respect for the judicial system because of a statement attributed to the Justice Minister. They were sentenced to two years in prison and fined 2,201 Egyptian Pounds (US\$397).

The editor and the two journalists have all appealed the conviction and the sentence and have paid 5,000 Egyptian Pounds (US\$893) to remain at liberty pending the hearing of the appeal.

ARTICLE 19 and Index on Censorship strongly condemn this series of prosecutions: the two organizations are particularly concerned with the abuse of legal procedures and of criminal law to suppress legitimate criticisms of the government and free expression.

We call upon the Egyptian government to urgently improve protection of freedom of the press in Egypt, in line with Egypt's international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, both of which are legally binding treaties that guarantee the right to freedom of expression and the right to a fair trial.

NOTES TO EDITORS

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights 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 freedom of expression.