

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

AI Index: MDE 12/015/2007 (Public)  
News Service No: 083  
26 April 2007

### **Egypt: Closing workers advice centre against protecting workers' rights**

Amnesty International condemned the Egyptian government's closure of a leading workers advice centre yesterday, on the eve of the country's Labour Day, and said it undermined President Hosni Mubarak's claims in a speech today that his government is committed to protecting workers' rights. As a result of the forced closure of the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS) office in Helwan, Cairo, the organization said Egyptian workers will be impeded from accessing information and advice about labour rights.

The CTUWS, an independent civil society group defending workers' rights, advises workers on their rights and reports on labour rights related violations. It has been the subject of a campaign of public attacks by the official Egyptian Trade Union Federation since December 2006 accusing it of instigating workers' strikes in the Nile Delta. Similar allegations were also made by the Minister of Manpower and Immigration on TV talk shows and before the Shura Council, the Egyptian Parliament's upper house.

Some 200 security force personnel yesterday surrounded the CTUWS office in Helwan to implement a decision reportedly taken on 22 April by the Minister of Social Solidarity to shut the centre down. They used force to evacuate the office staff and human rights activists who had been for the last two days staging a sit-in there in solidarity with the CTUWS in an attempt to prevent the office closure, following reports of the Minister's decree. The head of the Local Council of Helwan, who was also present, indicated that he had received an order to close the office, but failed to show any document to the CTUWS director and others. The CTUWS later learned that the decision to close the Helwan office was taken by the local administration responsible for licensing.

The forced closure of the office in Helwan is the third in a series of such acts against the CTUWS in less than a month. Two previous orders led to the closure of the offices in Naj' Hammadi (Qena governorate) on 29 March and in Mahalla al-Kubra (al-Gharbiya governorate) on 10 April. Hundreds of security forces were then deployed to implement the Ministry's decision to close the Mahalla al-Kubra office; to date security police trucks remain stationed next to the office's building.

Fifteen representatives of human rights non-governmental organizations visited the Ministry of Social Solidarity on 24 April 2007 to discuss the closure of the CTUWS offices. They were told by officials from the Ministry that the decisions to close the CTUWS were taken by the Local Authority and had nothing to do with the ministry. On the same day, the UN Committee on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families appealed to an Egyptian delegation headed by the Minister of Manpower and Immigration in a meeting in Geneva to reopen the CTUWS to enable workers to enjoy better protection of their rights; however, the Minister provided no such assurance.

The attacks against the CTUWS offices appear to be linked to its active role in informing workers of their rights, including during the trade union elections in October 2006, and in reporting on the widespread irregularities that characterized those elections. They also seem to be linked to a CTUWS report critical of the recent trade unions elections and the role played by the Egyptian Trade Unions Federation and the Ministry of Manpower and Immigration.

By closing down the CTUWS offices, the Egyptian authorities are not only breaching their obligations to uphold the right to freedom of association, they are also preventing workers from receiving valuable independent advice and legal aid in support for their labour rights, including the right to strike and to organize freely.

Amnesty International calls on the Egyptian authorities to immediately rescind the decisions to close the CTUWS offices and lift any other restrictions imposed on it to allow the centre to provide a much needed assistance in defence of the workers' rights.

### **Background**

The harassment of the CTUWS and the closure of its offices came amid workers strikes in various industrial sectors spreading mainly through the Nile Delta region. The strikers were demanding a pay rise, better work conditions and bonuses and criticizing the government-affiliated general trade unions for being too close to the government and failing to secure their demands, especially after the irregularities that were reported during the trade union elections in October 2006.

The strikes by workers in Mahalla al-Kubra (al-Gharbiya governorate), which led to a series of strikes in other factories in the Nile Delta, started over demands by textile workers that the 100 Egyptian pounds bonus (approx. US\$ 18) they receive at the end of each year be increased to equal a two-month salary in accordance with a March 2006 Prime Ministerial decree (No. 4667) increasing the bonus to all public-sector textile workers. The strikes in Mahalla al-Kubra intensified with the failure of the government-affiliated General Textile Worker's Union to deliver on its trade union election promises and secure the increased bonus from the government, and continued until the government offered a 45-day bonus.

The government's decision to grant the end of year bonus to the Mahalla al-Kubra workers spurred strikes in other factories in the Nile Delta. Thousands of workers in Kafr al-Dawar (Buhayra governorate) and Shibeen al-Kum (Manufiya governorate) went on strike demanding similar treatment and asking for better wages and work conditions.

The CTUWS has been blamed by the Minister of Manpower and Immigration for instigating and encouraging strikes in a number of factories across the country, particularly in Mahalla al-Kubra where 20,000 textiles workers were on strike for several weeks in December 2006 and January 2007.

The CTUWS, which is currently registered as a civil company, sought in 2003 and 2004 to register as an association under the restrictive law on associations (Law 84 of 2002), but was denied registration as the law prohibits associations from engaging in union and political activities. It has recently applied to register as two separate bodies: one as a civil company providing training and legal aid to workers and one as an association. The Ministry of Social Solidarity has so far not given an answer regarding these applications.