

URGENT ACTION

MORE ACTIVISTS FACE PRISON IN OMAN

A further six activists were sentenced by a court in the Omani capital, Muscat, on 9 September on charges related to the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression. If imprisoned, they will be prisoners of conscience.

Five activists – **Ismail al-Muqballi, Ali al-Hajji, Mahmoud al-Jamoudi, Hassan al-Ruqaishi and Nabhan al-Hanashi** – were sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment and each fined 1,000 Omani rials (approximately US\$2,600) for insulting the Sultan, undermining the status of the state, and using the internet to publish defamatory materials. A sixth man, **Ishaq al-Aghbari**, was sentenced to one year in prison and fined 1,000 Omani rials for insulting the Sultan and using the internet to publish defamatory materials.

They had posted material on the internet commenting on recent developments in Oman, including criticism of actions taken by the authorities resulting in the repression of freedom of expression. All six have been released on bail pending appeals.

At least another three men – **Khaled al-Noufali, Sultan al-Sa'adi and Hatim al-Maliki** – are expected to be sentenced on 16 September.

Trials began after numerous writers, activists and bloggers were arrested in late May and early June. So far at least 35 people have been sentenced or are standing trial in relation to the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

Please write immediately in Arabic, English or your own language:

- Calling on the authorities of Oman to release, immediately and unconditionally, all detainees held solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly, as Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience;
- Calling on them to drop all charges, and quash all convictions, related solely to the peaceful exercise of the rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 23 OCTOBER 2012 TO:

Head of State and Prime Minister

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id Al
Said

Diwan of the Royal Court

The Palace, Muscat 113

Sultanate of Oman

Fax: +968 24 735 375

Salutation: Your Majesty

Minister of the Interior

His Excellency Hamoud bin Faisal bin
Said Al Busaidi

Minister of the Interior

Ministry of Interior

PO Box 127, Ruwi 112, Muscat

Sultanate of Oman

Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:

Chairman

Mr Mohammed bin Abdullah Al Riyami

National Human Rights Commission

P.O. Box 29, Postal Code: 103

Bareq A' Shati

Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

Fax: +968 24 648 801

Email: enquiry@nhrc.om

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please insert local diplomatic addresses below:

Name Address 1 Address 2 Address 3 Fax Fax number Email Email address Salutation Salutation

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the third update of UA 174/12. Further information:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/mde20/001/2012> <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/mde20/002/2012> and

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/mde20/003/2012>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Protests in Oman in January and February 2011, sparked by popular unrest across the Middle East and North Africa, led to a number of government measures. In response to protesters' demands, on 27 February 2011, Oman's head of state, Sultan Qaboos, ordered the creation of 50,000 jobs and 150 Omani riyals a month (about US\$390) in benefits for the unemployed. On 7 March, Sultan Qaboos reshuffled and restructured the cabinet, sacking a number of ministers.

However, the Omani authorities have continued to maintain strict restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly and protests against the authorities have continued intermittently since March 2011. Protesters have voiced the need for greater freedom of the press and for certain current and former ministers to be held to account for offences they are alleged to have committed while in office. Scores of protesters were arrested and many brought to trial in 2011, while at least one man reportedly died when police forcibly dispersed protesters in the town of Sohar, north of Oman.

The most recent arrests began on 31 May 2012 when three activists were arrested when they tried to travel to Fohoud oil field (about 250km south-west of Muscat), to document an oil workers' strike that had started a week earlier. The three – lawyer **Yaqoub al-Kharousi** and activists **Habeeba al-Hina'i** and Ismail al-Muqbali from the newly formed Omani Group for Human Rights – were reportedly charged for inciting a protest. Habeeba al-Hina'i and Yaqoub al-Kharousi were released on bail on 4 June. Ismail al-Muqbali was recently released on bail following his sentencing on 9 September on a different set of charges (mentioned above).

Following this, further arrests took place of writers and activists in early June. Shortly after the arrests, the Public Prosecution issued a number of statements, one of them on 4 June saying legal action would be taken against anyone who published "offensive writing" in the media or online that was deemed to be "inciting" others to action "under the pretext of freedom of expression".

Several of the activists arrested in the recent crackdown were previously arrested in 2011. For instance, lawyer **Basma al-Kiyumi**, who was detained on 11 June 2012 and sentenced on 8 August, had been previously arrested on 14 May 2011 during a peaceful protest in front of the Shura Council in Muscat, along with 14 others, and was released on bail two days later after being charged with participating in an unlawful gathering.

The rights to freedom of expression and assembly are guaranteed under international human rights law and standards. Where restrictions are imposed they must be for certain specific purposes, which include the rights and reputation of others, and must be demonstrably necessary and proportionate and must not put in jeopardy the right itself. Public figures of authority should tolerate a greater degree of criticism, not less, than people generally, and accordingly, criminal or other laws which provide special protection against criticism for public officials are not consistent with respect for freedom of expression.

See for more information *Omani activists sentenced as crackdown on free speech continues* (17 July 2012) at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/omani-activists-sentenced-crackdown-free-speech-continues-2012-07-17> and *Oman: Intolerance of dissent mounts as a dozen more activists sentenced* (8 August 2012) at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/oman-intolerance-dissent-mounts-dozen-more-activists-sentenced-2012-08-08>

Name: Ismail al-Muqbali (m), Ali al-Hajji (m), Mahmoud al-Jamoudi (m), Hassan al-Ruqaishi (m), Nabhan al-Hanashi (m), Ishaq al-Aghbari (m), Khaled al-Noufali (m), Sultan al-Sa'adi (m), Hatim al-Maliki (m), Yaqoub al-Kharousi (m), Habeeba al-Hina'i (f), and Basma al-Kiyumi (f).
Gender m/f: Both

Further information on UA: 174/12 Index: MDE 20/004/2012 Issue Date: 12 September 2012