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15 February 2000

Amnesty International (AI)
Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network
Human Rights Watch (HRW)
International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH)
Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (LCHR)
Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (a joint program of FIDH & OMCT)
World Organization Against Torture (OMCT)

Egyptian Human Rights Defender faces years of imprisonment

In a statement today, seven international human rights organizations condemned Egypt's attempt to prosecute prominent human rights defender Hafez Abu Sa'ada on spurious charges before an (Emergency) Supreme State Security Court (ESSSC) which denies defendants the most basic right -- the right to a fair trial.

"The case of Hafez Abu Sa'ada, General Secretary of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), clearly suggests that the Egyptian authorities are trying to muzzle human rights defenders in Egypt," the international human rights organizations said.

The organizations further noted that this alarming development occurs as Egyptian human rights organizations await with concern the implementation of the controversial NGO law of 1999 regulating status and activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Egypt.

Hafez Abu Sa'ada has been charged with accepting a cheque of about \$25,000 from the British embassy in 1998 without giving required notification to the authorities. According to official sources, he will be charged under military decree No 4/1992, issued by the Prime Minister in 1992, which carries a term of imprisonment of at least seven years.

"The charges against Hafez Abu Sa'ada appear to be connected to the EOHR's critical reporting on cases of human rights violations in Egypt," the human rights organizations stressed.

First investigations into the case took place a few weeks after the EOHR had published a highly sensitive report on human rights violations which had occurred in summer 1998 in the predominantly Coptic Christian village of al-Kushh, Upper Egypt.

The initial charges against the EOHR were based on *"accepting funds from a foreign country with the aim of carrying out acts that would harm Egypt, receiving donations without obtaining permission from the competent authorities [and of] disseminating false information abroad that would harm the country's national interests"*.

Investigations lead to Hafez Abu Sa'ada's detention between 1 December and 6 December 1998 when he was released on bail after widespread protest by human rights organisations in Egypt and abroad. At the World Conference in Paris to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights in December 1998 he arrived after five days' detention in Tora Prison, Cairo. He was held in a cell of 2m by 2m with his head shaved and in prison clothes.

Amnesty International, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, Human Rights Watch, International Federation of Human Rights, Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, World Organization Against Torture are calling upon the Egyptian authorities:

to drop the criminal prosecution against Hafez Abu Sa'ada

to stop the use of exceptional (Emergency) Supreme State Security Courts (ESSSC) - which allow no right of appeal

to ensure that human rights defenders in Egypt can work in an environment without interference and harassment in accordance with the spirit of the UN Human Rights Defenders Declaration of 1998

Background:

Military decree No 4/1992 is based on the state of emergency legislation and prohibits the collection or receipt of donations without prior approval of the authorities. Article 2 of that decree stipulates imprisonment of a minimum of seven years for violations of the decree. Egypt has been ruled under a state of emergency since 1981. The state of emergency, which has been regularly extended by presidential decree, expires in May 2000.

The EOHR has been operating under difficult conditions for many years. Since its establishment in 1985 the organization has not been able to obtain official registration and has continued to operate "*in formation*". The EOHR has recently applied for official registration under the new NGO law of 1999.

The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) reported in January 2000 that it had learned by coincidence of an administrative decree issued in September 1999 which imposes a ban on the organization's journal "Huquq al-Insan" (Human Rights) as well as on several publications of other institutions. The ban on the EOHR's publication has so far not been enforced, but became known while the EOHR was preparing a report on an incident of sectarian violence which occurred in the village of al-Kushh at the beginning of this year and left more than 20 people dead.

In May 1999 the Egyptian Parliament passed a new law, Law No 153/1999, regulating the status of civil associations and institutions in Egypt. The law was criticized by national and international human rights organization for giving the authorities far-reaching controls over non governmental organizations' (NGO) activities, including the work of Egyptian human rights groups. Cause for serious concern included that the law provides a set of criminal penalties, including a maximum sentence of one year in prison, for offenses that might amount to no more than the exercise of freedom of association.

The UN Human Rights Defenders Declaration of 1998 recognizes the rights and responsibilities of human rights defenders and requires governments to create an environment in which they can work without interference and harassment. Article 6 of the Declaration states:

"Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others:

(a) To know, seek, obtain, receive and hold information about all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including having access to information as to how these rights and freedoms are given effect in domestic legislative, judicial or administrative systems;

(b) As provided in human rights and other applicable international instruments, freely to publish, impart or disseminate to others views, information and knowledge of all human rights and fundamental freedoms"

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 171 413 55665599 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>