

URGENT ACTION

RELIGION CRITIC'S VERDICT DELAYED IN EGYPT

The trial of Alber Saber Ayad has been thrown into disarray after the judge hearing the case joined a nationwide strike in Egypt. The court had been due to hand down its verdict in late November, but has now set the final session for 12 December 2012.

The prisoner of conscience, on trial for posting videos on-line and managing a Facebook page considered by the Egyptian authorities as "defaming religion", now faces an agonizing wait before he finally learns his fate. If convicted he could receive a six-year prison sentence and a fine of 500 Egyptian pounds (US\$82).

Alber Saber Ayad's prison conditions reportedly improved after Egyptian human rights organizations filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor in late October 2012. While he is still being held in the same cell, he now has better access to water and a toilet. He has also received medical attention for one of his hands, reportedly injured after a member of the security forces tugged on his handcuffs during a court session.

Judges across Egypt are striking against a recent decree by President Mohamed Morsi, which they see as an attack on their independence. The decree prevents courts from reviewing the President's decisions, or dissolving the assembly writing Egypt's next Constitution. It also replaces the Public Prosecutor and orders the re-opening of investigations and prosecutions of officials accused of killing protesters, which would apparently allow for the retrials of security officers and members of the authorities under Hosni Mubarak acquitted of killing protesters, which was previously prevented by Egyptian law. Thousands of protesters have taken to the streets in the last week to protest the move.

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

- Urging the Egyptian authorities to release Alber Saber Ayad immediately and unconditionally as he is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as his right to freedom of expression;
- Urging them to ensure Alber Saber Ayad receives any medical treatment he may require, and that his prison conditions are in line with international standards, including the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and the Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 12 DECEMBER 2012 TO:

Minister of Interior
Ahmed Gamal El Din
Ministry of Interior
El Sheikh Rihan St
Cairo, Egypt
Fax: +202 2795 9494
Salutation: Your Excellency

Public Prosecutor
Talaat Abdallah
Dar al-Qadha al-'Ali
Ramses St
Cairo, Egypt
Fax: +202 2 577 4716
Salutation: Dear Public Prosecutor

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country.

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the second update of UA 278/12. Further information:
<http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE12/034/2012/en>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Alber Saber Ayad was arrested at his home in Cairo on 13 September 2012, a day after angry groups of men surrounded and tried to break into his house and called for his death, accusing him of heresy and atheism and of promoting *Innocence of Muslims* – a short film regarded by many to be offensive. His mother called the police for protection but when they eventually arrived the next day they arrested Alber Saber Ayad and confiscated his personal computer and CDs. His mother has subsequently left her home for fear of further altercations with the men. Alber Saber Ayad told his lawyers that, while in detention, a police officer in El Marg Police Station incited other detainees to attack him. The trial has been marred by the judge's refusal to allow the defence to call key witnesses, including the arresting and investigating officers, and the individuals who complained about Alber Saber Ayad.

The charges against Alber Saber Ayad are reminiscent of practices under Hosni Mubarak to limit freedom of expression. Karim Amer, a blogger, was sentenced to four years in prison in 2007 for criticizing Hosni Mubarak and Egypt's al-Azhar religious authorities in his blog. In November 2008, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) declared Karim Amer's detention to be "arbitrary" on the grounds that it violated freedoms guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Film clips purportedly made by a US-based anti-Islam propagandist were translated into Arabic and posted on the Internet under the title of *Innocence of Muslims*. They depict the prophet Muhammad and other figures revered by Muslims in an insulting manner and have deeply offended many Muslims. The clips have been cited as the reason for a series of protests in several predominantly Muslim countries in front of embassies and other places associated with the USA and other Western states. Some of these protests have been violent and have resulted in deaths and injuries to protesters and members of the security forces. An Egyptian court sentenced eight people, eight Coptic Christians and one US Christian pastor, to death in their absence for allegedly producing or promoting the film on 28 November 2012.

Amnesty International has also received reports other cases of individuals being accused and convicted of blasphemy. These include the case of a Shi'a man reportedly charged with desecrating a mosque, two Muslim men reportedly charged with defaming Christianity for burning the Bible, and a Christian man reportedly sentenced to six years in prison for posting pictures on the Internet which were deemed offensive to Islam.

International human rights law protects expression of ideas that are offensive. Criticism of religions and other beliefs and ideas is a vital component of the right to freedom of expression. Laws – such as blasphemy laws – that criminalize criticism of (or insult to) religious beliefs violate freedom of expression. Such criticism, insult or mockery does not interfere with the individual believer's freedom of religion, however offensive they may find it.

Name: Alber Saber Ayad
Gender m/f: m

Further information on UA: 278/12 Index: MDE 12/039/2012 Issue Date: 3 December 2012