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Oman must end assault on freedoms of expression and assembly

As 29 Omani human rights activists convicted of charges such as insulting the Sultan and unlawful gathering either begin serving prison sentences or prepare to do so in the next few days, Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all those held simply for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression or assembly.

The appeal court in the capital, Muscat, upheld verdicts against the 29 activists on 5 and 12 December. Meanwhile, scores of other activists facing similar charges are expected to hear the court's decision on their appeal cases over the next few weeks.

Twenty-eight of the 29 activists will be serving prison sentences ranging from six months to a year. The 29th received a suspended prison sentence. The court of first instance in Muscat had convicted the 29 activists in several separate trials from 26 June to 16 September.

On the basis of information it has received to date, Amnesty International believes that many, if not all, of those imprisoned are held solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression or assembly and are therefore prisoners of conscience. The organization urges the Omani authorities to release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally and to quash their convictions.

Six other activists are to receive their appeal decisions on 2 January 2013, while three others are to appear before the appeal court on 13 January, although a decision is not expected on that date. Sessions of similar trials of other activists may take place before the end of the year.

On 5 December the appeal court in Muscat upheld convictions against five men and a woman, who are in their twenties and thirties, for insulting the Sultan and using the internet to publish defamatory material. The five men Abdullah al-Abdali, a student, Bassam Abu Qasida, a schoolteacher, Hilal al-Busa'idi, an employee in a private company, Issa al-Mas'udi, a schoolteacher of Arabic, and Muhammad al-Kiyumi received sentences of a year in prison and a fine of 1,000 riyals (around US\$2,600) each. The woman, Maymouna al-Badi, left the court with a sentence of 20 days' imprisonment.

Muscat's court of first instance had originally sentenced the five men on 6 August 2012, and Maymouna al-Badi on 26 August.

On 12 December the appeal court in Muscat upheld the court of first instance's convictions of 11 men and one woman for insulting the Sultan and using the internet to publish defamatory material. Ten of the men – Abdullah al-Arimi, Abdullah al-Siyabi, Ali al-Meqbali, Hamad al-Kharousi, Mahmoud al-Rawahi, Mohamed al-Badi, Mohamed al-Habsi, Nabhan al-Hanashi, Rashed al-Badi, and Taleb al-Ebri – and the woman, Mona Harden, were sentenced to a year in prison and a fine of 200 to 1,000 riyals (around US\$520 to US \$2,600), while the 12th defendant, Hamoud al-Rashidi, received a suspended six-month prison sentence.

Verdicts against 11 other activists, nine men and two women, who had been sentenced to six months in prison and a fine of 200 riyals for unlawful gathering, were also upheld by the appeal court on 12 December. Three of the 11 are also facing other charges including insulting the Sultan and violating Oman's internet laws and will be appearing again before the

appeal court in January. The 11 activists are Abdullah al-Ghilani, Badr al-Jaberi, Basimah al-Rajih, Basma al-Kiyumi, Khaled al-Nawfali, Mahmoud al-Jamoudi, Mahmoud al-Rawahi, Mohamed al-Fazari, Mukhtar al-Hana'i, Nasser al-Ghilani and Saeed al-Hashimi.

Background information

At least 35 Omani activists have been sentenced or are standing trial in relation to the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. The trials began earlier this year after numerous writers, activists and bloggers were arrested in Oman in late May and early June.

The crackdown began on 31 May 2012, with the arrest of three activists who tried to travel to Fohoud oil field, approximately 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 in connection with inciting a protest.

Then in June several dozen more writers and activists were arrested – at least 22 people were detained on 11 June alone after protesting peacefully outside Muscat's police headquarters, where they were calling for the three arrested on 31 May to be set free.

During this time, Oman's Public Prosecution issued a number of statements threatening to take legal action against anyone who publishes "offensive writing" in the media or online deemed to incite others to action "under the pretext of freedom of expression".

On 10 June a public prosecutor confirmed the arrests in the *Times of Oman* newspaper, saying "we are keeping a watch on the bloggers who use such platforms". A further official statement on an Oman News Agency website said that publications "provoking sit-ins and strikes...are against values and morals of the Omani society... Such practice prejudices the national security and public interests".

Similar on-going media and judicial harassment have been reported by activists who have expressed their concerns over the increasing crackdown on their basic freedoms.

Protests in Oman in early 2011 – that coincided with popular unrest across the Middle East and North Africa – led to a number of political and social reforms, but tight restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly remained in place. Scores of protesters were arrested and many brought to trial in 2011. Omani police also violently dispersed protests on a number of occasions, leading to the reported death of at least one man in the town of Sohar.