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Sudan: Restrictions on freedom of expression must be lifted

Following the confiscation of an edition of the *Khartoum Monitor* newspaper on 9 March, Amnesty International is calling for restrictions on the freedom of the Sudanese press to be lifted.

"The Sudanese government's imposition of "red lines" prohibiting the reporting of politically sensitive issues is a clear violation of the internationally recognised right to freedom of opinion and expression," the organization said. "The suspension of *al-Watan* newspaper, banned since 28 December 2002, should be lifted immediately."

"Once again the national security service has been repressive in clamping down on free discussion," said Amnesty International. "Sudanese newspapers still offer many lively and interesting articles reflecting different viewpoints. But there will be no real protection of human rights in Sudan as long as the media are restricted in this heavy-handed way."

The *Khartoum Monitor's* confiscation is "laughable if it was not serious," the organization said. The apparently offending letter in the *Khartoum Monitor's* issue of 9 March 2003 quoted at length from a well-known history of Sudan concerning Egyptian Mamluk expeditions against Dongola between 1275 and 1324 suggesting that the advance of Islam in the Sudan had not always been peaceful.

As a result of this, the whole edition was confiscated, causing serious financial loss to the newspaper, and the acting editor, Nhial Bol, was summoned to be interrogated for an hour by the security services on 10 and 11 March.

"It is of fundamental importance that journalists, media and all Sudanese should be able to hold free discussions on important questions relating to the future of Sudan, including questions of human rights and those areas which are being defined and discussed by the peace negotiators," Amnesty International said.

The list of topics which have brought harsh government action covers a large number of areas: the conflict in the South, in border areas or elsewhere, and any criticism of government actions in relation to the peace talks; human rights violations within the Sudan including detention of government critics; protest demonstrations; criticism of government policies.

On 28 December the director of national security suspended the newspaper *al-Watan*, which had published a number of articles against corruption. The newspaper's editor, Sid Ahmed Khalifa, heard of the suspension of the newspaper, which had a print-run of 20-25,000 and employed 65 staff, only through the media.

"The Government of Sudan should cease these restrictions on the internationally recognised right to media freedom and lift the suspension on *al-Watan*," Amnesty International said.

"It will be impossible to secure a peace based on justice if the media and individuals are prohibited from speaking freely on issues, including issues of human rights."

Background

The national security frequently takes action against the Sudanese press in ways which are unchallengeable and often secret.

In recent years Sudanese security have harassed and detained journalists and editors and confiscated, fined and arbitrarily suspended newspapers which have criticised actions of the government or exercised their right to freedom of expression.

Newspaper editors told Amnesty International delegates during a recent visit to Sudan that they were given "red lines" and that security officials would frequently ring up newspapers in the morning telling them what they should or should not publish. It is said that now the "red lines" include the conflict in the Darfur region and discussion of the "marginalised areas" between north and south - the Nuba Mountains, Southern Blue Nile and Abyei - the subject of the current peace talks between the Sudan Government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in Kenya.

Public Document

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