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Bahamas: journalist must be released

Journalist and Senator Obie Wilchcombe, imprisoned yesterday, 21 June 2000, for refusing to disclose confidential information, must be immediately and unconditionally released, Amnesty International said today, declaring him a prisoner of conscience.

"He has been imprisoned because he has exercised his fundamental right to freedom of expression," Amnesty International said.

"Wilchcombe's sentencing will have a chilling effect on journalists, who could be deterred from making public information about human rights abuses by the authorities out of fear of imprisonment," the organization added. "Journalists must be allowed to protect their confidential sources of information."

"His imprisonment could also intimidate and silence people willing to provide information about human rights violations in the future because of fear of exposure."

At the inquest into the death of death row inmate John Higgs -- who committed suicide the day before his scheduled hanging on 6 January 2000 -- Obie Wilchcombe was asked to reveal where he had been handed a letter from Higgs, the content of which he had broadcast on radio. Higg's letter described the cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions within Fox Hill prison and on death row. A Privy Council law lord had earlier condemned the prison conditions as "sub-human". Obie Wilchcombe refused to answer this question, saying that he did not wish to reveal this information for fear that it may lead to identification of the person who had smuggled the letter out of prison to him. The

coroner imposed a four-day prison sentence for his refusal to answer this question. This sentence was upheld by the Appeal Court.

In protest at the Appeal Court decision and the lack of legislation to protect journalists, Obie Wilchcombe began a hunger-strike on the same day, stating, "It is a matter of principle and it is worth the fight. It is a struggle. With all struggles you must fight for what you believe in."

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