

PUBLIC

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UA 80/98

Possible prisoners of conscience /  
Health concern

12 March 1998

**EGYPT**Magdi Ahmad Hussain, editor-in-chief, aged 45  
Mohammad Hilal, journalist, aged 32

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The recent arrest and imprisonment of Magdi Ahmad Hussain and Mohammad Hilal, editor-in-chief and journalist of the opposition newspaper *Al-Sha'ab*, possibly constitutes a serious violation of their human rights. Amnesty International believes that they may be prisoners of conscience, and is seriously concerned that Magdi Ahmad Hussain, who reportedly suffers from chronic back problems, may not be receiving adequate medical care.

The two men were convicted on charges of libel brought by 'Ala' al-Alfi, the son of the former Minister of the Interior, after *Al-Sha'ab* in 1996 published a number of articles accusing him of corruption.

Magdi Ahmad Hussain and Mohammad Hilal were initially sentenced to three years' imprisonment each in July 1997, but were not imprisoned pending an appeal. In his absence, Magdi Ahmad Hussain was on 24 February 1998 sentenced by a Cairo appeal court to one year's imprisonment with hard labour. He was also ordered to pay 'Ala' al-Alfi 500 Egyptian pounds (ca. 150 \$US) in damages. Mohammad Hilal, who was also absent at his trial, was sentenced to one year in prison, allegedly for drawing a caricature depicting the minister's son.

Magdi Ahmad Hussain was arrested at Cairo Airport on 8 March after returning from a visit to Iran. Mohammad Hilal went into hiding on 24 February before giving himself up on 10 March.

Both men are currently being held in Tora penitentiary in Cairo. Lawyers acting on their behalf have appealed before the Court of Cassation, arguing that there were procedural irregularities during the first trial. They have also asked the Public Prosecutor to stop the appeal court verdict being carried out, and for the two men to be released until the Court of Cassation has made a decision regarding their appeal.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Government crackdowns on press freedom in Egypt continue. A new lawsuit against Magdi Ahmad Hussain and Mohammad Hilal has been brought by the former Minister of the Interior, Hassan al-Alfi, for publishing articles in the summer of 1997 accusing him and his family of involvement in wide-scale corruption. The trial has been postponed to the summer of 1998. A number of journalists, among them other *Al-Sha'ab* employees, are currently also being sued by government officials for publishing critical articles.

*Al-Sha'ab* newspaper is the mouthpiece of the Labour Party, one of the main legal opposition parties in Egypt. Since the end of the 1980s the party has increasingly adopted political Islam as its ideology. Leading members of the party have often been subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention and torture. The whereabouts of 'Abd al-Rahman Lutfi, the secretary of the Labour Party in Mallawi arrested on 12 February, are still not known (see Urgent Action 69/98, issued on 5 March 1998, index number MDE 12/14/98).

At the end of February 1998 the weekly magazine *Al-Destur* was banned from printing after publishing a statement from the armed Islamist group *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya*, which threatened three Coptic Christian businessmen with death.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Arabic, English, French or your own language:**

- expressing concern at the imprisonment of Magdi Ahmad Hussain and Mohammad Halil, arrested on 8 and 10 March 1998 respectively, and urging that if they have been convicted solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, they are prisoners of conscience and should be immediately and unconditionally released;
- urging that they be humanely treated while in detention and that they be given immediate access to medical care, especially in the case of Magdi Ahmad Hussain.

**APPEALS TO:**

His Excellency General Habib al-'Adeli  
Minister of the Interior  
Ministry of the Interior  
Al-Sheikh Rihan Street, Bab al-Louk, Cairo, Egypt  
**Telegrams: Minister Habib al-'Adeli, Cairo, Egypt**  
**Telexes: 21361 MOICM UN**  
**Faxes: + 202 579 2031**  
**Salutation: Dear Minister**

His Excellency Faruq Sayf al-Nasr  
Minister of Justice  
Ministry of Justice  
Midan Lazoghly, Cairo, Egypt  
**Telegrams: Minister Sayf al-Nasr, Cairo, Egypt**  
**Faxes: + 202 355 5700**  
**Salutation: Dear Minister**

**COPIES TO:**

Ms Nayla Gabr  
The Human Rights Department  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
Corniche al-Nil, Cairo, Egypt  
**Faxes: + 202 574 9533**

Mr Raga' al-'Arabi  
Public Prosecutor  
Dar al-Qadha al-'Ali  
Ramses Street, Cairo, Egypt

and to diplomatic representatives of Egypt accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 28 April 1998.