

PUBLIC

**AI Index: MDE 12/030/2007
14 September 2007**

UA 244/07 Legal concern

EGYPT Victims of torture

On 16 September, Cairo city government officials are expected to close a non-governmental organization, the Association of Human Rights and Legal Aid (AHRLA), which is based in the city. By closing down AHRLA, the authorities are violating freedom of association and preventing torture victims from receiving valuable independent advice and legal aid.

The AHRLA has been told it will be closed for breaching Article 17(2) of Law 84 of 2002, which prohibits the receipt of foreign funds without the government's permission. Such charges have previously been used by the authorities as an attempt to silence human rights defenders. The decision to dissolve AHRLA means that its assets will be seized and criminal charges brought against its director.

The decision to close the AHRLA appears to be linked to its support for victims of torture and exposure of human rights violations in Egypt. The Association has been providing legal advice to victims of such violations, in particular to those who have been tortured while in custody at police stations or other detention centres, including by representing them before Egyptian courts. One of these victims is political detainee Mohamed Abdelkader al-Sayyed, whose relatives came to the AHRLA for advice after he died in police custody in 2003. The circumstances of his death suggest that torture or other ill-treatment led or contributed to his death at the hands of an officer of the State Security Investigations (SSI) services. SSI officers have been allowed to commit serious human rights violations with impunity. Despite a forensic report stating that the injuries to the body of Mohamed Abdelkader al-Sayyed at the time of his death were consistent with injuries that can be sustained by being hit by solid objects and by exposure to high temperature or electric shocks, the SSI officer who was allegedly responsible for his death was acquitted by a Cairo criminal court on 5 September 2007.

The alarming attack against AHRLA comes a few weeks after the Ministry of Social Solidarity, which is responsible for regulating non-governmental organizations, citing "security reasons" in its refusal on 14 August 2007 to officially register the Centre for Trade Unions and Human Affairs (formerly known as the Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services, whose offices were closed in April 2007). Such worrying developments happen at a time when Egyptian human rights organizations await amendments to the law, which may further restrict and control their activities through increased administrative measures, purportedly for security reasons.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Charges of receiving foreign funds without authorization were brought against other human rights defenders in the past in an attempt to intimidate them. Hafez Abu Seada, Secretary General of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, and Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Director of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, were charged with receiving foreign funds without the authorities' permission, in 1998 and 2000 respectively. Both were later acquitted by the courts. Criticism of the strict regulations on foreign funding of NGOs in Egypt has been expressed by the UN Committee for Economic Social and Cultural Rights in relation to the now defunct Association Law (Law 153 of 1999). In addition, in November 2002, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed similar concerns and called on Egypt to "review its legislation and practice in order to enable non-governmental organizations to undertake their attributions without obstacles which are inconsistent with provisions of article 22 of the Covenant [the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ICCPR], such as prior approval, control of funding and administrative dissolution."

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Arabic, English or your own language:

- expressing concern over the measures taken in order to close down the AHRLA and halt its activities in support of victims of torture and other ill-treatment;
- calling on the Egyptian authorities to immediately rescind any decisions to dissolve AHRLA and lift any other restrictions imposed on it to allow the Association to provide much needed assistance in defence of human rights;
- urging the authorities to respect AHRLA's right to free association as set out in the UN Declaration on HRDs, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

APPEALS TO:

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Salutation: Dear Minister

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Salutation: Dear Governor

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 26 October 2007.*****