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## **Egypt: Release journalist facing military trial for Sinai coverage**

An Egyptian journalist facing an unfair military trial over his coverage of events in Sinai must be immediately and unconditionally released, said Amnesty International ahead of a hearing in his case on Sunday.

The organization believes that Ahmed Abu Deraa, 38, an award-winning journalist, and father of two, is being prosecuted for challenging the army's version of its operations in the restive North Sinai region.

“The authorities’ decision to try a journalist and a civilian in a military court is a serious blow to press freedom and human rights in Egypt,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa. “Egyptian military trials are notoriously unfair and in any event, trying civilians in military courts flouts international standards.”

Ahmed Abu Deraa, a correspondent for Al-Masry al-Youm, an Egyptian daily newspaper, is accused of publishing false information and trespassing on a military zone without a permit. He was arrested on 4 September at a coastal border guard base after he went there to inquire about an injured relative arrested in early September following a military operation in the village of Muqat’a.

Ahmed Abu Deraa is one of the few independent voices reporting from North Sinai, an area which has been plagued by security threats and instability. The armed forces have conducted several military operations since July 2013 against what the authorities describe as militant groups active in the region.

During a press conference on 15 September, the military spokesperson maintained that the armed forces respect media freedom. He argued that Abu Deraa had made false claims that the armed forces destroyed mosques, evicted residents and targeted women and children during military operations.

Since the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi on 3 July, army checkpoints, security personnel and government buildings have come under increased attack by militants. In one of the bloodiest incidents, on 19 August, 25 conscripts with the Central Security Forces were ambushed on the road and killed by armed militants.

A day before his arrest, Ahmed Abu Deraa posted a message on Facebook reporting that the Egyptian army had bombed the villages of Muqat’a and Touma in Sheikh Zaid in North Sinai. Six homes and a mosque were damaged in the attack, he said. He also reported that the military arrested an injured resident. In an earlier post, he explicitly questioned the army’s and media’s version of events in North Sinai.

“The charges against Ahmed Abu Deraa should be dropped, and he should be immediately released,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

“Arresting reporters for doing their job under the pretext of fighting terrorism is a breach of Egypt’s international obligations and undermines the right of Egyptians to receive information. Journalists must be able to carry out their professional duties without fear of being targeted by the authorities or facing arbitrary restrictions on their work. The Egyptian authorities’ and armed forces’ respect for freedom of expression will be judged by their actions, not their rhetoric.”

Ahmed Abu Deraa faces charges of spreading false information which endangers “national security” and “weakens fiscal confidence in the country” and its “prestige”. He also faces a separate charge for entering a prohibited military zone without a permit. If convicted, he could face five years in prison.

Under the Code of Military Justice, military courts deal with crimes committed in military bases or other locations occupied by soldiers.

Earlier this week, Egypt’s Foreign Minister, Nabil Fahmy, assured his US counterpart, John Kerry, that civilians will not face military trials in Egypt.

Mohamed Sabry, another independent, Sinai-based journalist, is also facing military trial after his arrest on 4 January. He is charged with trespassing and filming in a prohibited place without authorization.

### **Background information:**

#### **Military trials**

Since 3 July there has been a worrying increase in military trials of civilians, particularly in Suez. A number of alleged supporters of the deposed president Mohamed Morsi were convicted after unfair trials by military courts in Suez. For instance, on 3 September, the Suez Military Court convicted 47 civilians to prison terms ranging from five years to life for committing violent acts, while over a dozen other civilians were acquitted. Their lawyers complained about facing obstacles in getting access to their clients.

Other recent military trials are not linked to the political turmoil. For example, on 24 July, two men, Ramadan Ahmed Ismail Mahfouz, 32, originally from Fayoum, and Mohamed Amin Mohamed, originally from Aswan, were sentenced to one year imprisonment terms for insulting and punching a soldier by the Suez Military Court. The charges are based on an altercation with the soldier at a checkpoint.

More than 12,000 civilians were tried unfairly by military courts during the 17-month rule of the army from February 2011-June 2012.

Amnesty International opposes the trials of civilians by military courts, which in Egypt are fundamentally unfair and breach a number of fair trial safeguards, including the right to a fair and public hearing before a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by law.

Egypt is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which enshrines the right to a fair trial.

The suspended 2012 Constitution, as well as the July 2013 Constitutional Declaration, allow for the trial of civilians by military courts. The campaign group No to Military Trials and other Egyptians NGOs and activists are urging the 50 member committee currently revising the Constitution to explicitly prohibit the trial of civilians by military courts in all circumstances.