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Web Feature

## **Egyptian blogger faces 10-year prison sentence**

Egyptian blogger Karim Amer is standing trial for his writings criticizing Egypt's al-Azhar religious authorities, Islam and President Husni Mubarak. His trial resumes on 22 February 2007 before Maharram Bek Court in Alexandria and, if convicted, he could face up to 10 years in prison.

Amnesty International (AI) considers Karim Amer to be a prisoner of conscience who is being prosecuted on account of the peaceful expression of his views about Islam, the al-Azhar religious authorities and politics in Egypt. The organisation is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

Charges against Karim Amer include "spreading information disruptive of public order and damaging to the country's reputation", "incitement to hate Islam" and "defaming the President of the Republic".

Karim Amer was first detained by the Egyptian authorities for 12 days in October 2005 because of his writings on his blog, Karam903, about Islam and the sectarian riots that took place in Alexandria's Maharram Bek district in the same month. These riots followed reports that the video of a play, believed to be anti-Islam, was being screened in a Coptic church in the district and that DVDs of the play were on sale in that church.

Although he was released without charge, al-Azhar University's disciplinary board found him guilty of blaspheming Islam and dismissed him from the university in March 2006.

He was again summoned to appear before the office of the Public Prosecutor in Maharram Bek district of the city of Alexandria on 7 November 2006 following a complaint lodged against him by al-Azhar University. The Public Prosecutor ordered his detention for four days on 7 November, which was later extended for a further 15 days, to allow further time for investigation.

He has remained in detention since then, following a series of extensions. While in detention, he was kept in solitary confinement and in incommunicado detention and visits by his relatives were only allowed in the last week of January 2007.

Karim Amer is the first Egyptian blogger to stand trial. His trial appears intended as a warning by the authorities to other bloggers who dare criticize the government or use their blogs to spread information considered harmful to Egypt's reputation.

His trial is particularly worrying as the Egyptian blogosphere is expanding as an area of free expression and bloggers have increasingly been posting information about human rights abuses in Egypt, including allegations of torture and police violence against peaceful protesters. Their writings and postings of information on human rights violations, including graphic evidence of such abuses, have been relayed by international media and highlighted by

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national and international human rights organizations, putting pressure on the Egyptian authorities to open investigations into some of these allegations.

Amnesty International has been urging the Egyptian authorities to review or repeal all legislation that, in violation of international standards, stipulates prison sentences for the peaceful exercise of the rights of freedom of expression, thought, conscience and religion.