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Arab League summit should repudiate new controls on satellite broadcasting

Representatives of the League of Arab States, meeting in Damascus, Syria, 28-29 March should take steps to address key human rights problems confronting the Middle East region, Amnesty International said today.

"The Arab League has increasingly engaged in efforts to resolve some of the major political divisions in the region, notably the continuing impasse which has prevented the election of a new president in Lebanon," said Malcolm Smart, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme. "But it has failed to address deep-seated human rights concerns and recently has taken a serious backward step by supporting new curbs on broadcasting."

The organisation called for the League to repudiate, clearly and totally, the Principles for Regulating Satellite Broadcasting Transmission in the Arab World, which were adopted by Ministers of Information of League member states on 12 February and form part of a draft Arab Satellite Broadcasting Charter.

"Satellite broadcasting has been vital to increasing the free flow of information and ideas in the Arab world, and should not be made subject to further illegitimate restrictions," said Malcolm Smart. "In many countries, the media remains under close state control and television and radio broadcasters and the press already have to struggle against the odds to bring key information into the public domain, and many journalists continue to be harassed and penalised for their reporting."

The Principles for Regulating Satellite Broadcasting Transmission in the Arab World were introduced by Egypt and Saudi Arabia and adopted on 12 February 2008 by Information Ministers from member states of the League of Arab States at a meeting in Cairo. Only Qatar and Lebanon opposed such principles. Although currently non-binding, if given the force of law in particular countries they would impose new limitations on satellite broadcasters and run foul of states' obligations to uphold freedom of expression. This includes their obligations under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 32 of the Arab Charter on Human Rights (ACHR), which came into force only on 15 March 2008 as a result of its ratification by seven Arab states. The ACHR guarantees freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any medium, regardless of geographical boundaries in its Article 32.

The Principles contain loosely-worded restrictions and limitations on the broadcast or rebroadcast of satellite transmissions which exceed those permitted under international law, including article 19 of the ICCPR and article 32 of the ACHR. Satellite broadcasters and service providers would be required to adopt rules and regulations that prohibit the description of "certain crimes as an alluring act or portraying the perpetrators as heroes or justifying its motives." They would also be

required to adhere to ill-defined standards, including the “religious and ethical values of Arab society” and its “family structure” and to maintain “Arab identity against the negative impact of powers of globalization.” As well, broadcasters would have to abstain from broadcasting anything deemed to be in contradiction with “Arab solidarity and promotion of pan-Arab cooperation and integration” and to refrain from offending the leaders or national and religious symbols in the Arab world.

“The Principles represent a glutinous mass of further sanctions and restrictions that appear designed to further impede the free flow of information and ideas in the Arab region,” said Malcolm Smart. “They provide for limitations that go far beyond those permissible under international law and should be completely and utterly rejected.”

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