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Sudan: End clampdown on freedom of expression before referendum

The Sudanese authorities should halt the harassment and intimidation of journalists in the run up to the Referendum on southern independence in January 2011, Amnesty International said in a new briefing released today.

The Chains Remain: Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in Sudan documents a clampdown on freedom of expression in Sudan since the April 2010 elections that has seen journalists regularly detained for carrying out their work while others have been tortured or tried on politically motivated charges.

“No credible poll can be conducted in an environment where freedom of speech is being so openly violated,” said Rania Rajji, Amnesty International’s Sudan researcher.

“The governments of north and south Sudan must ensure the vote is held in an atmosphere where all Sudanese can freely express their views and halt any further restrictions to freedom of expression”.

Throughout northern Sudan, the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) has placed strict controls on the press. Between May and August 2010 NISS agents visited newspaper print houses on a daily basis removing sensitive articles. A large number of newspapers were also closed down.

Although this pre-print censorship was removed on 7 August, a “code of journalistic honour” still imposes many restrictions. The code, which was introduced by the government in September 2009, requires journalists to “defend the interest of the nation” and in practice forces newspapers to self censor out of fear of reprisal and legal action against them.

In July 2010 the NISS distributed a form to all newspapers requiring journalists to submit personal information including bank details and home addresses.

Following the presidential elections in April 2010, five journalists were arrested because of articles published in the newspaper Rai Al Shaab, including an analysis of the election result. Two of the men were reportedly tortured while in custody. One journalist was subsequently released but four were taken to court on charges including ‘propagating false news’. One was acquitted but one was sentenced to five years in prison, the remaining two to two years in prison.

One Khartoum-based journalist working for an opposition newspaper told Amnesty International that it was nearly impossible to publish articles relating to human rights in national newspapers because of this climate of fear.

Websites have also been blocked by government.

The BBC Arabic radio service was suspended on 9 August in four major cities including the capital

Khartoum for allegedly having breached its agreement with the government. The service has not yet been reinstated.

In southern Sudan, the press was also curbed during the presidential elections as journalists were harassed for writing articles critical of the government, hosting debates on the election or interviewing independent candidates. Some were detained by the southern Sudanese security forces before being released without charge.

“The forthcoming referendum will bring new challenges and political uncertainty to Sudan. To ensure that human rights are respected, protected and promoted during the referendum, the government must ensure freedom of expression and allow journalists to voice their opinions and engage in debates about the future of the country,” said Rania Rajji.

Notes to Editors

- On 9 January 2005, the second Sudanese civil war between northern and southern Sudan officially ended with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The CPA created an interim period of 6 years where the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the National Congress Party (NCP) would work together to make unity attractive to the people of southern Sudan.
- The Government of Southern Sudan was given autonomy and SPLM members were given positions in the Government of National Unity, including First Vice President.
- The CPA provides for a referendum at the end of the interim period for the people living in southern Sudan to decide whether southern Sudan will confirm the unity of Sudan or vote for secession.
- The referendum is scheduled for 9 January 2011.
- The CPA marked the end of censorship on newspapers in Sudan. However, in February 2008, the government of Sudan reinstated the NISS controlled pre-print censorship after newspapers reported that the government had supported Chadian armed opposition groups in launching an attack on N’Djamena, the capital of Chad.
- The pre-print censorship was maintained from February 2008 to September 2009, where it was ended by presidential decree and replaced with the “code of journalistic honour”. The censorship was however reinstated in May 2010, immediately following the general Sudanese elections.
- Three senior journalists Abuzar Al Amin, Ashraf Abdelaziz and Tabir Abu Jawhara are currently imprisoned in Sudan after they were sentenced on July 14. Amnesty International considers the three prisoners of conscience, detained solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression. They should be unconditionally released.
- For full details of press censorship in Sudan, please see *The Chains Remain: Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in Sudan*.