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Sudan: Harassment of the "Khartoum Monitor" must stop

Amnesty International today called on the Sudanese authorities to stop harassing the independent daily Khartoum Monitor and its staff.

On 15 January, Nhial Bol, the Khartoum Monitor's Chief Editor, was sentenced to six months imprisonment unless he pays a fine of 5 million Sudanese dinars (about USD 1,905). The newspaper was fined 15 million Sudanese dinars (about USD 5,703). Its assets are under threat of seizure if the fine is not paid.

Nhial Bol was convicted of "propagating false news" after a summary and unfair trial, for having published an article suggesting government complacency towards slave raiders in Sudan. He was detained for two days, at which time Amnesty International considered him to be a prisoner of conscience, held solely for the peaceful expression of his opinions. He was tried just hours after being arrested and his defence lawyer was not allowed to talk during the trial. Nhial Bol was released on 17 January after Khartoum Monitor staff members managed to pay his fine. The defence lawyer lodged an appeal against the sentence on 19 January. However, the fine against the Khartoum Monitor still stands.

"The Sudanese authorities are using excessive fines and unfair and arbitrary trials to curtail freedom of expression," Amnesty International said. The organization believes that the Khartoum Monitor is harassed because of its articles critical of the Sudanese government.

"The charges against the Khartoum Monitor amount to a restriction of the fundamental right to freedom of expression and should be dropped" Amnesty International added.

The charges against the newspaper and its chief editor contravene the universal right to free expression enshrined in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Sudan is a party. The offence of "propagation of false news" under Section 66 of the Sudanese Penal Code, punishable by imprisonment for up to six months or a fine of an unspecified amount, can be interpreted by the Sudanese authorities to include any criticism of the government.

Background

The "Khartoum Monitor" was established in 2000 by journalists coming from southern Sudan, much of which has been at war with the Sudanese government for 17 years. It is the main newspaper that publishes articles relating to southern Sudan, the war and peace proposals and initiatives, issues on which the government exercises heavy censorship. Since it began publishing, the newspaper has had its publication temporarily halted, its staff harassed, intimidated and arbitrarily detained and its articles censored. Recent charges filed by the Sudanese authorities against the staff of the Khartoum Monitor relate to articles on the war and peace proposals, interpreted as offences ranging from "sedition" to "war against the state".

The Sudanese authorities have repeatedly denied the existence of slavery in the country, stating that it is a problem of traditional tribal abductions over which they have little control. Human rights organizations report that the government, as part of its counter-insurgency effort against armed opposition groups in the South, supports militias based in Western Sudan. These militias are responsible

for raiding villages and abducting civilians. Abducted civilians are reportedly used as unpaid domestics or labourers.

In December 2001, the government announced that censorship would be lifted against all newspapers, including the *Khartoum Monitor*. The newspaper had to sign, prior to this announcement, a code of ethics which exhorts journalists to respect "national achievements" and to avoid certain issues, including "insulting armed forces or mujahedin and martyrs" or "publicising moral accusations against the country". However, on 10 January 2002, the authorities reimposed censorship on the *Khartoum Monitor*, allowing security services to screen articles before they are published.

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