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Hafez Abu Sa'ada returns to Egypt: Authorities must now stop harassment of human rights defenders

Amnesty International delegates together with representatives of local non-governmental organizations will be at Cairo airport today to welcome -- and monitor -- the return of Hafez Abu Sa'ada, Secretary General of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR).

"Hafez Abu Sa'ada's return to Egypt today, despite facing possible imprisonment, is a courageous decision demonstrating his commitment to continue to work for the protection and promotion of human rights in Egypt," Amnesty International said today.

"We call on the Egyptian authorities to allow him to enter the country freely. The authorities should also show their commitment to human rights in accordance with international standards and end harassment of human defenders in Egypt."

Hafez Abu Sa'ada's return to Egypt followed the announcement of the Egyptian General Prosecution on 13 February 2000 to refer his case to the (Emergency) Supreme State Security Court under charges which carry a minimum of seven years imprisonment.

"We remain extremely concerned that the Egyptian authorities appear not to have given assurances that the pending charges against Hafez Abu Sa'ada will be dropped and the case closed," the organization stressed.

Amnesty International remains concerned by the various attempts by the Egyptian authorities to muzzle human rights defenders, for which the case of Hafez Abu Sa'ada is only one recent example. In this context, Amnesty International will be closely monitoring the implementation of the controversial NGO law of 1999, regulating the status and activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Egypt.

The 1999 NGO law imposes a wide range of restrictive conditions on the management, operations and financing of NGOs and will allow authorities to control relations at the international level, activities at the local level, funding from abroad as well as the composition of boards of directors. Violations of the law that amount to no more than the right of freedom of association can be punished by imprisonment.

Amnesty International continues to call upon the Egyptian authorities:
to drop the criminal prosecution against Hafez Abu Sa'ada
to stop the use of exceptional (Emergency) Supreme State Security Courts (ESSSC) - which allow no right of appeal
to ensure that human rights defenders in Egypt can work freely in an environment without interference and harassment in accordance with the spirit of the UN Human Rights Defenders Declaration of 1998

to review the 1999 law on NGOs to ensure that legal provisions regulating NGOs will contribute to improving the framework for human rights work in conformity with international standards and not impose or maintain restrictive conditions.

Background

On 13 February 2000 the Egyptian General Prosecution Office announced the referral of the case of Hafez Abu Sa'ada to the (Emergency) Supreme State Security Court (ESSSC), under military decree No 4/1992. Hafez Abu Sa'ada is accused of accepting a cheque of about \$25,000 from the British embassy in 1998 without giving required notification to the authorities. The EOHR Secretary General faces a term of imprisonment of at least seven years.

On 17 February, Amnesty International and six other international NGOs strongly condemned this decision as an attempt by the Egyptian authorities "to muzzle human rights defenders in Egypt". It is widely believed that the charges against Hafez Abu Sa'ada are connected to the EOHR's critical reporting on cases of human rights violations in Egypt.

First investigations into the case took place a few weeks after the EOHR had published a report on human rights violations which had occurred in summer 1998 in the predominantly Coptic Christian village of al-Kushh, Upper Egypt.

The initial charges against the EOHR were based on "accepting funds from a foreign country with the aim of carrying out acts that would harm Egypt, receiving donations without obtaining permission from the competent authorities [and of] disseminating false information abroad that would harm the country's national interests."

Investigations lead to Hafez Abu Sa'ada's detention between 1 December and 6 December 1998 when he was released on bail after widespread protest by human rights organizations in Egypt and abroad. In December 1999 EOHR's President, 'Abd al-'Aziz Muhammad, was summoned by the police and questioned about the case.

In January 2000, sectarian violence erupted in the village of al-Kushh, leading to the deaths of 21 Christians and one Muslim. EOHR was preparing for the launch of a report in mid February 2000 on the recent events in al-Kushh which included criticism of the performance of the security forces.

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For more information or to arrange an interview please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>

You can also see statement by Amnesty International and six other international NGO's: *Egyptian Human Rights Defender faces years of imprisonment*, 15 February 2000, AI Index: MDE 12/04/00.