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Egypt blogger on hunger strike must be released as health fails

The Egyptian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release a detained blogger who has been on hunger strike for over a month, Amnesty International said today.

The health of twenty-five year-old Maikel Nabil Sanad, who has been on hunger strike since 23 August, has greatly deteriorated since prison authorities took away vital heart medication, his family says.

"It is deeply worrying that Egypt's treatment of dissenters seems to have changed little since President Mubarak was in charge," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Maikel Nabil Sanad must be released immediately and unconditionally. In the meantime, he must be given the medical attention he requires," she said.

The blogger was arrested on 28 March at his home in Cairo, tried in a military court on 10 April and sentenced to three years' imprisonment over comments he made on Facebook, and for allegedly spreading lies and rumours about the armed forces on his blog.

On it, he criticizes the military's use of force against peaceful protesters in Tahrir Square, and describes how he was detained and tortured by the Egyptian military in February.

His appeal against the court ruling is set for 4 October.

When his family visited him in the prison hospital on 19 September, he told them the prison authorities had removed vital medication for his heart condition, arguing that since he is on hunger strike he cannot take his medication without being supervised by a doctor. He has not been seen by a heart specialist, however.

His weight has also plummeted from 60 kilos to 48 kilos since he began the hunger strike.

"Doctors are telling us that people on hunger strike don't survive more than 40 days. Today is Maikel's 34th day. The most important thing for us right now is that Maikel receives appropriate medical care from a private hospital at least until his next court session on 4 October," his brother Mark Nabil Sanad told Amnesty International.

"Maikel has vowed not to end his hunger strike until he's released. We've made several requests to the Egyptian authorities and we hold them responsible for anything that happens to Maikel," he added.

His brother told Amnesty International that Maikal claimed the prison authorities planted drugs in his bag in an apparent attempt to scare him into ending his hunger strike.

He handed the drugs to an official from the public prosecutor's office, who visited him in prison, and explained that there had been an attempt to frame him, his brother told Amnesty International.

Amnesty International considers Maikel Nabil Sanad to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression.

"Since protests began in Egypt at the beginning of the year, at least 12,000 people have been referred to military trials," said Mark Nabil Sanad.

"Nothing has changed since the 'revolution'."

"In fact, things are getting worse," he added.

Mark Nabil Sanad was recently threatened with prison by the authorities for his public support of his brother Maikel.

"Mark Nabil Sanad is being targeted simply for seeking to defend his brother from injustice," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

"The Egyptian authorities must immediately stop intimidating him. Any threats or abuses by security officers against him must be investigated and those responsible held accountable".

Amnesty International opposes the trial of civilians by military courts and considers these courts as fundamentally unfair, as they deprive defendants of some of the basic guarantees of fair trial, including the right to appeal.

In the Egyptian military court system, appeals are limited to legal points and do not include a review of the facts of the case and the evidence.