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Egypt must drop charges against three activists

Amnesty International has urged the Egyptian authorities to drop all charges against two leading human rights activists and a well-known blogger whose trial is expected to conclude in Cairo on Saturday.

Gamal Eid, Ahmed Seif El-Islam Hamad and blogger Amr Gharbeia, a staff member at Amnesty International, are accused of "defamation", "the use of threats" and "misuse of communication tools".

The charges are connected to allegations made by a judge in 2007 that the two activists tried to extort money from him. Amr Gharbeia is charged with defaming the same judge on his blog.

Amnesty International will be sending an observer to Saturday's trial, where all three men may face imprisonment and a fine if convicted.

"A guilty verdict would be a further nail in the coffin of freedom of expression in Egypt, where questionable criminal defamation charges are frequently used to harass those critical of the authorities and public officials," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa director.

"We fear this is the latest attempt to intimidate independent human rights organizations as part of a wider crackdown against dissent."

Gamal Eid is director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and Ahmed Seif El-Islam Hamad is the founder of the Hisham Mubarak Law Center (HMLC).

Both men were accused in February 2007 of trying to extort money from Judge Abdel Fatah Murad.

Days before the judge's complaint, ANHRI and HMLC had published a statement accusing Abdel Fatah Murad of plagiarizing an ANHRI report on restrictions on the internet in the Arab world and reproducing it in his book.

The statement by ANHRI was in response to a book review written by Amr Gharbeia on his blog on 7 Feb 2007, in which he covered the anti-freedom of expression stance in Judge Murad's book, *The Scientific and Legal Principles of Blogs*.

An investigation by the Egyptian Public Prosecution followed and Amr Gharbeia was interrogated for possible "defamation" on account of comments posted by third parties on his blog.

"The right to freedom of expression involves the right to freely criticize public officials, public officers, public personalities and authorities. Egyptian officials should respond on the merits of the criticisms raised

rather than resort to criminal defamation charges to penalize and try to silence them," said Malcolm Smart.