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Egypt: Overturning of jail sentences against editors welcome but concerns remain

The Egyptian authorities must stop prosecuting independent journalists for their writings, Amnesty International said as it welcomed the decision by a Cairo Appeals Court today to overturn the one year prison sentence handed out to four newspaper editors for publishing offences. The organization believes the case against the editors to be part of a concerted campaign by the authorities to stifle criticism.

“We are relieved that the four editors’ prison sentences have been overturned but the imposition of heavy fines and the prospect of trials on vaguely worded charges constitute unacceptable obstacles to freedom of the press in Egypt,” said Amnesty International.

The Agouza Appeals Court quashed the one year prison sentence handed out to editors Ibrahim Eissa of the daily Al-Dustour, Wael al-Abrashy of the weekly Sawt al-Umma, Adel Hammouda of the weekly Al-Fajr, and Abdel Halim Qandil, former editor of the weekly Al-Karama, but upheld the 20,000 Egyptian Pounds (around USD3500) fine against each of them. Their lawyers announced that they will take the case to the Court of Cassation.

In July 2006, a controversial press law was passed by parliament that further curtailed freedom of expression. Certain publishing offences, such as insulting public officials, continued to carry custodial sentences. Independent and opposition newspapers withheld publication for a day in protest at the new law and hundreds of media workers protested outside the Egyptian parliament.

All four editors were tried by the Agouza First Instances Court on 13 September 2007 and given the maximum sentence of one year in prison and 20,000 Egyptian Pounds stipulated under Article 188 of the Egyptian Penal Code for anyone who “malevolently publishes false news, statements or rumours that is likely to disturb public order”.

One of the four editors, Ibrahim Eissa, had his six-month prison sentence for spreading false rumours about the health of President Mubarak reduced to two months by an appeals court in September 2008; he later received a presidential pardon in October 2008.

Editors of the independent daily Al-Masry al-Youm, Magdy Al-Gallad, and opposition newspaper, Al-Wafd, Abbas Al-Tarabily, as well as three journalists working for them have been tried for allegedly breaking the ban ordered by the court on publishing details regarding the court hearings in the trial of a prominent Egyptian businessman and a former member of the State Security Investigations services accused of the killing of Lebanese singer Suzanne Tameem. The trial will resume on 12 February 2009.

“We call on the Egyptian authorities to stop using the press law to muzzle freedom of speech and to

recognize the important role of a free and independent press in any society," said Amnesty International.