

**REPORTERS
WITHOUT BORDERS**
FOR PRESS FREEDOM

1The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States
The White House
Washington DC

Paris, May 7, 2008

Dear Mr. President:

On the eve of your trip to the Mideast, we would like to draw your attention to the state of press freedom in the countries you will be visiting.

We call upon you to raise the issue of censorship in Saudi Arabia with your counterpart, King Abdallah bin Abdelaziz bin al-Saud as we are very concerned about freedom of expression throughout the Kingdom-- both on the Internet and in the audiovisual media. Are you aware that your own name does not appear on the Saudi Web because it has been censored? Saudi Arabia has one of the most restrictive web-filtering policies in the world. Moreover, since February 2008, direct satellite TV programs are prohibited on all public stations to dissuade viewers from using live broadcasts to publicize their concerns.

The Saudi government's determination to control public life led to the arrest of blogger Fouad Al Farhan on December 10, 2007. Recently released, Al Farhan spent over four months in prison in Djeddah for comments he made on the Internet. He was accused of blasphemy because he published an article about the "advantages" and "disadvantages" of being a Muslim. Despite our organizations' appeals about the ongoing implications targeting the blogosphere, the authorities have never revealed the exact charges which led to his arrest. . The values advocated by the Kingdom must not, under any circumstances, be permitted to justify this kind of censorship.

In Egypt as well, the free circulation of information over the Internet is in jeopardy. Egypt will nevertheless be hosting the "Internet Governance Forum" in 2009. The Internet has enabled journalists and bloggers to report on issues frequently ignored in the state controlled print media. The power of this medium was demonstrated when two government officials were imprisoned for torturing prisoners after the results of their actions were shown in a video posted online.

Blogger Abdel Nabil Suleiman ("Kareem Amer") was given a four-year prison sentence in February for "incitement to hatred of Islam" and for insulting Mubarak. He became a symbol of online repression for the country's bloggers. Another blogger, Abdul Moneim-Mahmud, spent two months in prison after being accused of belonging to an "illegal organization,"- the Muslim Brotherhood. But Moneim-Mahmud was most likely jailed for having posted text and photos online exposing torture tactics enforced by the Egyptian security services.

Freelance journalists are also constantly harassed by the arbitrary decisions of a state-controlled justice. The media are confronted with pressures that translate into a multitude of courtroom convictions. In another recent case, Ibrahim Issa, chief editor of the independent weekly *Al Doustour*, was sentenced to six months with hard labor for "putting out false news harmful to the country's general interests and to national security." The state of emergency declared immediately after the assassination of president Anwar el-Sadat in 1981 is still in effect. Its enforcement has had far-reaching implications for freedom of expression, since Egyptian courts strictly apply the penal code when punishing press offences.

We call upon you to urge President Hosni Mobarak to obtain the release of blogger Kareem Amer and to put an end to the harassment of the opposition media and Internet users.

In Israel, we ask you to intervene with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to ensure that the authorities quickly release the findings revealed by the probe into the shelling of Palestinian Reuters TV cameraman Fadel Shanaa, 23. It is apparent that an Israeli tank crew committed a "serious criminal error" by firing a shell at Shanaa as he was filming an Israeli incursion into the Gaza Strip on April 16. Shanaa's soundman, Wafa Abu Mizyed, was injured in the attack, which Israeli authorities say they are investigating.

The Israeli military must show responsibility clearly and establish and sanction those who fired the shot. Israeli soldiers guilty of criminal negligence, or of deliberately firing at journalists, have in the past been exonerated by their superiors. We must not let this happen again. These practices are unacceptable for a state that advocates democratic principles.

We believe it is imperative that the United States of America, through its President, remind its key allies in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel, of the importance of the right to inform and to be informed, and do everything it can to promote a greater freedom of expression in those countries. Reporters, bloggers, and citizen journalists are crucial witnesses to the events occurring throughout the region. A vigorous press capable of informing their people and of holding those in power accountable is crucial to the future of the peace talks and to the welfare of the entire region.

I trust that you will give my remarks all due consideration.

Yours sincerely,



Robert Ménard
Secretary general

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