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Egypt: Interior Minister must immediately release Egyptian blogger Hani Nazeer

Amnesty International is calling on the Minister of Interior to abide by the judicial ruling issued on Sunday and immediately and unconditionally release Hani Nazeer, a prisoner of conscience detained solely for the peaceful expression of his views.

Hani Nazeer, a Coptic Christian and blogger from Qina, Upper Egypt, continues to be held in Borg al-Arab Prison, near Alexandria, despite lawyers from the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information having obtained four court orders enjoining his release, most recently on 10 January when a Supreme Emergency State Security Court confirmed a previous court order to release him.

Hani Nazeer has been detained since October 2008 under a succession of administrative detention orders issued by the Interior Minister using powers provided under Egypt's long-running state of emergency legislation. These administrative detention orders were issued so as to replace those ruled invalid by the court, therefore showing contempt to the Egyptian courts and undermining the value of judicial scrutiny and oversight.

The administrative detention orders against Hani Nazeer were issued following his arrest when he surrendered to the police in Nagaa Hammadi, who had detained his brothers and threatened to detain his sisters to force him to surrender. This was after residents of Qina denounced him for posting on his blog the cover of a book they deemed insulting to Muslims, forcing him to go into hiding. The book was a response to another book considered insulting to Christians and featured on its cover a goat on top of the Kaaba, the most sacred Muslim site in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. A few days after his arrest, he was transferred to Borg al-Arab Prison near Alexandria, some 700km away from his family.

While in prison, Hani Nazeer was reported to have been pressured by security officers to convert to Islam. In addition, his lawyers were prevented from visiting him at least twice throughout the course of 2009.

It is expected that Hani Nazeer will remain in Borg al-Arab Prison until a new administrative detention order is issued against him, as has been the case since his arrest in late 2008.

Amnesty International urges the Interior Minister to respect the court decision to release Hani Nazeer and to immediately order the release from administrative detention of all those who are detained under the Emergency Law for whom release orders have been issued by the court. The Minister should also stop misusing emergency powers to curb the right to freedom of expression.

The organization reiterates that the Egyptian authorities should not detain anyone for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression which is guaranteed in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Egypt is a state party.

Background

Administrative detention orders are issued by the Ministry of Interior, under the Emergency Law. Detainees are entitled to lodge a complaint against their detention to a Supreme (Emergency) State Security Court, which may issue an order for their release, against which the Ministry of Interior may appeal. If the ministry appeals, the complaint is then examined by another Supreme (Emergency) State Security Court. If this court also orders the detainee's release, the Ministry of Interior is required to comply and to free the detainee.

In practice, however, when such release orders are issued by the courts, the detaining authorities transfer detainees secretly to new places of detention, such as local police stations or State Security Investigations (SSI) premises in Cairo or elsewhere, and keep them in custody until a new detention order is issued by the Minister of Interior – on the false grounds that the detainee was released but immediately returned to criminal or terrorist activities and was then rearrested.

Public Document

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