

# SUDAN

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION UNDER ATTACK

Sudan has a lively and growing independent press, but journalists face harassment, suspension and arrest, if they cover stories that the authorities do not want aired. Newspapers critical of the government have been impounded and suspended, their staff arrested, ill-treated and fined.

One newspaper was suspended in December 2002 for seven months, another on May for two months, its Editor in Chief detained, ill-treated and fined.

The government uses a variety of means to restrict the press despite the fact that the 1998 Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and the press.

"Red Lines" have been drawn up by the security forces around subjects it sees as being critical of the government. These have included reporting on human rights situations in areas of conflict in the country and reporting about marginalized areas.

These "Red Lines" are arbitrary, applied inconsistently and often inexplicably. They convene not only the Constitution but also Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, both of which Sudan is a party to.

Journalists who cross this invisible line are arrested, interrogated, detained often for weeks and generally released without charge or fined. On release it is common for journalists to have to report regularly to the security forces, ensuring they are prevented from carrying out their legitimate peaceful employment.

Amnesty International is calling for the abolition of "Red Lines".

Although the system of "Red Lines" remained in force, 2001 saw some potentially positive developments relating to freedom of the press. Censorship was lifted by the President in December and the National Press Council (NPC) was established. The NPC, the official supervisory body of the printed media, includes journalists. However, it reports directly to the President and oversees compliance with the Press Act of 1999 and the 2001 Code of Ethics for journalists both of which are vague, open to abuse and serve to legitimise restriction of expression in Sudan.

The "Duties of journalists" in the Press Act are vague. Section 25 states that journalists shall: "not publish any secret information, relating to security of the country, or the disciplined forces" (25b); and shall "not publish any such matter, as may violate public morality" (25f).

The Code of Ethics also contains vague clauses which are easy to violate. Such requirements include the demand that journalists respect "national achievements" and avoid certain issues, including "insulting armed forces or *mujahedin* [the fighters] and martyrs" or "publicising moral accusations against the country".

The NPC offers a hearing to journalists who are called up before it. However, the penalties it can impose on those considered to have breached the Press Act or the Code of Ethics include reprimand, advising, warning or suspension, with the complete loss of earnings during the period of suspension.

Journalists alleged to have breached the terms of the Press Act and the Code of Ethics are at risk of penalties imposed by both the NPC and the national security

forces

All of these measures serve as a direct threat to the existence of the independent press in Sudan.

Those who have fallen foul of these restrictions include:

- Nhial Bol, the acting editor of the *Khartoum Monitor*. He was arrested and ill-treated in April 2003. He was subsequently fined one million Sudanese dinars (US \$400) and the newspaper was suspended for two months. This followed the publication of three articles, one about a priest who was imprisoned for refusing to demolish a church he had built in an area occupied by people internally displaced by the conflict outside Khartoum.

- On 9 March 2003 the National Security Forces confiscated all copies of the *Khartoum Monitor*, following the publication of a letter arguing that the early spread of Islam in Sudan had not always been peaceful. The acting editor of the paper, Nhial Bol, was summoned on two consecutive days to the security centre in Khartoum and questioned about the whereabouts of the letter writer. The latter was detained for two weeks then released without charge.

- On 28 December 2002 the Director of National Security suspended indefinitely *al-Watan* newspaper, which used to bring out a print run of 20-25,000 copies and employed 65 staff following the publication of a series on corruption. The suspension was issued under the State of Emergency Law. The newspaper remains suspended.

- On 9 November 2002 the National Security Forces confiscated issues of *al-Hurriya* and *al-Watan* newspapers apparently due to the newspapers' reporting of the clashes between Khartoum University students and riot police between 22 and 24 October. Security officials in Khartoum summoned the editor of *al-Watan*, Sid Ahmad Khalifa, and the editor of *al-Hurriya*, Sa'd al-Din Ibrahim. Sid Ahmad Khalifa was held for two days before being released without charge after interrogation.

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL IS CALLING FOR:

- The abolition of the system of "Red Lines".
- The authorities to amend provisions in Section 25 of the Press Code and the Code of Ethics to eliminate ambiguities or vagueness, and to ensure that they allow for freedom of expression as set out in Article 19 of the ICCPR and Article 9 of the African Charter.
- An end to the arbitrary detention, ill-treatment and intimidation of journalists and editors by the National Security Forces.
- An end to the practice of suspension of newspapers.

### ACT NOW!

#### ► Please send your appeals to:

- Mr Ali Osman Mohamed Taha  
First Vice-President  
People's Palace  
PO Box 281, Khartoum, Sudan  
Fax: + 249 11 771651/783223
- Mr Al-Zahaw Ibrahim Malek  
Minister of Information  
Khartoum, Sudan  
Fax: + 249 11 780146
- Professor Ali Shamaum  
Chair  
National Press Council  
PO Box 10030  
Khartoum, Sudan

#### ► Urge your own government to support AI's appeals.

#### ► Urge press in your own country to publicize the situation for their colleagues in Sudan.

Amnesty International  
AI Index: AFR 54/040/2003, July 2003  
EXTERNAL