

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Egypt: Harassment of Egyptian journalists must stop

Amnesty International is greatly concerned about the continuing threat of imprisonment hanging over Egyptian newspaper editor Ibrahim Eissa following yesterday's appeal court decision to reduce his sentence from six to two months for writing and publishing articles about the health of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Eissa, editor-in-chief of the daily *Al-Dustour*, was sentenced to a six month prison term in March 2008 but lodged an appeal, which led to his sentence being reduced to two months by the Boulaq appeals court. The articles in question, which suggested that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's health had deteriorated, led the authorities to charge Ibrahim Eissa with publishing information "damaging to the public interest and Egypt's national stability." The authorities claim that the articles were untrue and led foreign investors to withdraw investments worth some 350 million US dollars damaging the country's economy. The editor, who remained at liberty, on bail, pending the outcome of the appeal will now have to serve the two-month prison sentence, although it has been challenged before the court of cassation, unless the Public Prosecutor decides to stay its execution until the court of cassation has given its decision.

Ibrahim Eissa was charged under Articles 171 and 188 of the Penal Code. His prosecution forms part of a wider pattern in which the Egyptian authorities use criminal defamation and other charges to chill media expression and reporting on issues that they consider to be beyond the "red lines" of what may be disclosed to the public although they are, in reality, issues of clear public interest.

If Ibrahim Eissa is imprisoned, Amnesty International will consider him a prisoner of conscience and will call for his immediate and unconditional release.

The organization urges the Egyptian authorities to amend the controversial press law and all other provisions in the Penal Code that criminalize legitimate reporting and to cease using criminal defamation charges to harass journalists and prevent their reporting on matters of legitimate public interest.

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