

(Web feature)

Egyptian press plays vital role

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A leading independent Egyptian journalist has told Amnesty International of the importance of journalism under his country's "repressive regime".

Abdel Halim Qandil, former editor of *Al-Karama* and *Al-Arabi*, has been regularly punished by the authorities for speaking out against government corruption and human rights abuses in Egypt. In September this year, he and three other editors were fined and sentenced to one year in jail for "publishing false information likely to disturb public order". They were adjudged to have insulted President Mubarak and other government officials.

The four editors were later released on parole. Qandil describes the case as "perhaps the most lenient form of harm I have experienced in recent years." Previous penalties have been more extreme.

"On 2 November 2004, when I was the editor of *Al-Arabi* newspaper, I was kidnapped, attacked and then dumped naked onto Al-Moqatam remote desert outside of Cairo. An investigation was launched, but was later shelved," says Qandil.

Despite this persecution, the journalist believes his work and that of other independent journalists plays a vital role in an Egyptian society dominated by state-owned media.

"I think the role of the Egyptian press is largely positive," he says. "Some state-owned newspapers are sometimes used to serve the interests of the State Security Service and routinely defend violations by the Ministry of Interior. But there is another emerging sector: the opposition and independent newspapers defend human rights."

The issue of torture has long been a source of controversy between the government and the press in Egypt.

"Political and social issues cannot be separated from human rights," says Qandil. "Instances of torture concern the poorest sectors of the society, as they usually take place at police stations. Torture is just one aspect of many political and social violations."

Qandil considers journalism, along with organizations such as Amnesty International, key protectors of human rights in Egypt.

"Amnesty International's reports have gained great credibility. Human rights organizations in general are a source of support to the oppressed Egyptian people, who live under a repressive regime," he says.