

Endangered Journalists: International Roundup

Egyptian Blogger Sentenced to Four Years in Prison

A former Egyptian law student was sentenced to four years in jail after being found guilty of inciting hatred of Islam and insulting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in articles that the student posted online under an assumed name. The sentence drew criticism and concern from around the world.

The Egyptian government has refused to comment on the case, which marked the first time that an individual had been formally prosecuted in the country for posting opinions online. But, according to an article published by *The* (London) *Independent* on Feb. 23, 2007, many people in the mostly conservative, Muslim society believe that Abdel Kareem Nabil Suleiman “went too far” in expressing his beliefs.

“This is a dark day for all who are interested in freedom of expression and belief in Egypt,” Gamal Eid, an attorney for Suleiman, told reporters from *The Independent*.

Suleiman, who published articles and commentary on his weblog under the pseudonym Kareem Amer, was arrested in November 2006 after the university where he studied, al-Azhar University in Alexandria, Egypt, filed a complaint against him. According to the prosecutors, Suleiman had referred to companions of the Prophet Mohamed as “terrorists,” to the university as a “university of terrorism” and to President Mubarak as the “symbol of dictatorship” in eight articles he had posted to his weblog.

Suleiman also wrote of his interest in becoming a human rights lawyer and helping women in Arabic societies, and posted criticism of attacks by Muslims on the nation’s Christian populations.

On March 3, 2007, *The* (Ontario, Canada) *Hamilton Spectator* reported that Egyptian prosecutor Mohammed Dawoud told reporters from the Associated Press that Suleiman’s postings had injured Muslims across the world. “I want him to get the toughest punishment. I am on a jihad here . . . If we leave the likes of him without punishment, it will be like a fire that consumes everything,” Dawoud said.

The sentence drew condemnation from the international human rights organization Amnesty International, which called for the immediate and unconditional release of Suleiman after the sentence was handed down on Feb.

22, 2007. “This sentence is yet another slap in the face of freedom of expression in Egypt,” Hassiba Hadj Sahroui, Amnesty International’s deputy program director for the Middle East and North Africa, said. “The Egyptian authorities must protect the peaceful exercise of freedom and expression, even if the views expressed might be perceived by some as offensive.”

A press release published by Amnesty International and available online at <http://news.amnesty.org/index/ENGMDE120062007>, called for Egyptian authorities to repeal legislation that permits Egyptian courts to imprison individuals for acts “which constitute nothing more than the peaceful exercise of the rights of freedom of expression, thought, conscience and religion.”

The U.S. State Department also expressed its concern over the four-year sentence, condemning the Egyptian court for infringing on Suleiman’s right to express his opinion. “While we have great respect for all religions, including certainly Islam, the role of freedom of expression is critical for the development of a democratic and prosperous society,” State Department spokesperson Tom Casey said on February 22.

On February 23, *The Independent* reported that Suleiman’s lawyers were preparing his appeal. Muslims who were personally offended by Suleiman’s weblog postings but contend that Suleiman had a right to express his opinion have established a Web site, FreeKareem.org, to campaign for his release.

Deadly Decade for Journalists, Survey Finds

A survey conducted by the Brussels-based International News Safety Institute (INSI) found that more than 1,000 journalists were killed while reporting the news over the past 10 years, averaging almost two deaths every week.

The survey was conducted by INSI, a coalition of international media organizations and human rights advocates, between January 1996 and June 2006, and provides “the world’s most comprehensive inquiry into the deaths of journalists and other news media professionals,” according to the organization’s Web site. BBC global news director Richard Sambrook chaired the special inquiry.

The results of the study were reported on March 6, 2007, and detailed the deaths of journalists, media personnel, and other individuals who work with reporters to cover the news, such as interpreters.

The report found that casualties among journalists have reached record levels each year since 2004 and have increased steadily since 2000. It attributed

the rising death toll to the increasingly popular tactic of silencing reporters by killing them.

“The figures show that killing a journalist is virtually risk-free,” Sambrook said. “Ongoing impunity for the killers of journalists, who put themselves in harm’s way to keep world society informed, shames not only the governments who are responsible but also the democracies that stand aside in silence.

Although Iraq was found to be the deadliest country for journalists to work during the past decade, the INSI found that “most media workers killed in recent years died in their own countries,” often as a result of circumstances other than war or political strife. According to the report, reporters who lost their lives in peacetime were typically working on articles about corruption, drug trafficking and other criminal activities.

Over the last decade, the INSI estimates that 657 journalists were killed during peacetime, with the death tolls in Russia and Columbia being surpassed only by the death toll in Iraq.

A copy of the report is available online at the organization’s Web site, www.newssafety.com.

During March 2007, other international media organizations and advocacy groups, including Reporters Sans Frontieres (Reporters Without Borders) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), released studies covering the risks faced by reporters across the globe.

While the INSI found that the majority of victims over the last decade had been men, other news organizations and advocacy groups voiced concern for women journalists. On March 6, 2007, Reporters Sans Frontieres (Reporters Without Borders) said that more and more women journalists are falling victim to violence. “Women journalists are the victims of murder, arrest, threats or intimidation,” a press release on the organization’s Web site said. “This increase is due to the fact that more and more women are working as journalists, holding riskier jobs in the media and doing investigative reporting likely to upset someone.”

On March 15, 2007, the CPJ issued a press release that coincided with the fourth anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Research by the CPJ showed that 134 media workers were killed since the start of the war, making it the deadliest conflict in the organization’s 25-year history.

Finding that 80 percent of the journalists killed in Iraq since 2003 have been Iraqi citizens, CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon called the statistics “a

reminder of the enormous dangers our colleagues face in trying to report one of the biggest stories of our time.”

The press releases issued by Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists can be found on the organizations’ Web sites, www.rsf.org and www.cpj.org.

BBC Reporter Alive Despite Extremists’ Claims

On April 20, 2007, *The Times* (London) reported that BBC reporter Alan Johnston, who was kidnapped in Gaza on March 12, 2007, was alive despite an extremist group’s claims that it was responsible for the journalist’s death. Johnston was the only Western reporter permanently based in Palestinian territory.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas announced on April 19, 2007 that Johnston was alive and that efforts to secure his release were ongoing. The announcement contradicted statements made by Kataeb al-Jihad al-Tawheed, or the Brigades of Holy War and Unity, in a statement sent by the group to international news organizations claiming to have killed Johnston to support demands for the release of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli captivity.

After the claims surfaced, Palestinian interior minister Hani Kawasmeh held a press conference to question the claims made by the group. “This party that issued the statement about the so-called killing is unknown to the security services,” Kawasmeh told reporters.

According to an article published by the *Irish News* on April 16, 2007, however, the group’s name has been used elsewhere by organizations linked to al-Qaeda. Nevertheless, Kawasmeh told reporters that same day, “There is no information to confirm the killing of Johnston until now.”

Following the statement claiming Johnston had been killed, the BBC expressed concern over the e-mail message it received from the group claiming responsibility. According to reports on the Al-Jazeera news network, later reported by the BBC on April 16, the BBC and Palestinian officials could not verify the authenticity of the reports at that time.

Later that day, approximately 200 reporters and journalists attempted to enter the parliament building in Gaza, demanding that lawmakers release any information that the government possessed about Johnston.

The following day, on April 17, the London-based *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* reported that kidnappers claiming to have taken Johnston were demanding a \$5 million dollar ransom for the journalist’s return. At the time the *Silha Bulletin*

went to press, neither the BBC nor the family of Johnston had responded to the demand for ransom.

President Abbas, speaking during a visit to Sweden on April 19, claimed to know which extremist group was responsible for the kidnapping. "I believe he is still alive. Our intelligence services have confirmed to me that he's alive," Abbas said. But Abbas declined to provide any additional details.

Days later, a multi-faith service was held in London, at which BBC deputy director general Mark Byford told the congregation that "[f]or the last 75 years the BBC has relied on an extraordinary group of people who go into the world's trouble spots, often just as everyone else is getting out." He continued, "No one is braver or has faced more hardship than Alan Johnston." A similar vigil was also held in Pakistan and attended by both local journalists and foreign correspondents.

Meanwhile London Mayor Ken Livingstone appeared on Arab TV to appeal for information. He called Johnston's abduction, "a catastrophe" according to a BBC report.

Russian Reporter's Fall Leads to Demands for Investigation

The *Kommersant*, a Russian daily, reported on March 6, 2007 that a military affairs reporter working for the newspaper was reporting on a highly-sensitive story about Russia's plan to sell missiles to Syria and Iran in the days and weeks before falling to his death on March 2, 2007.

The reporter, Ivan Safronov, had told his editors shortly before his death of Russian plans to sell sophisticated missile technology to Iran and Syria through Belarus, straining Russian relations with the United States and Israel. The *Kommersant* also reported that Safronov had told colleagues that he could face criminal investigations for releasing state secrets if he continued his reporting.

Safronov was later found dead outside his apartment building, after the reporter fell from a fifth-floor stairwell window. On March 7, the Voice of America news service reported that Russian police had ruled out any criminal activity, declaring the death either an accident or suicide.

Although prosecutors have demanded an inquest into the circumstances surrounding Safronov's death, Russian officials have yet to respond.

The International Press Institute (IPI) expressed concern over Safronov's death and called on Russia to conduct a thorough investigation into the reporter's death, the third high-profile death of a Russian journalist in the last year. An editorial which appeared in *The Globe and Mail* (Canada) also expressed doubts

over the police investigator's claims, "particularly as he lived on the second floor and was returning from a shopping trip with a bag of groceries at the time [of his death]."

Voice of America reported that Johann Fritz, the IPI's director, expressed concern over "the deaths of many other Russian journalists and the impunity which accompanies these deaths," referring to several highly-publicized deaths of Russian journalists, including internationally-renowned human rights reporter Anna Politkovskaya and American-born *Forbes Russia* editor Paul Klebnikov. (See "Russian Spy May Have Been Poisoned for Investigating Journalist's Death" in the Winter 2007 issue of the *Silha Bulletin*; "Famed Russian Reporter Murdered in Contract Killing" and "Russia's Supreme Court Overturns Acquittals in Klebnikov Case" in the Fall 2006 issue).

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