



PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release – 14 April 2008

Yemen: Multiple Attacks on Freedom of Expression

ARTICLE 19 is alarmed by the recurring attacks against freedom of expression in Yemen. In the past week alone, Ms. Tawakkol Karman (Director of the NGO *Women Journalists Without Chains*) received death threats from an unknown caller, the comedian Fahd Al-Qarni was arrested by security agents, and the licence of *Al-Wasat* daily was withdrawn on orders from the Minister of Information H.E. Hassan Al-Lawzi.

In addition the ban on YemenPortal.net's alternative domains persists and there have been worrying reports on a new law to control the internet.

In the first week of April the comedian Fahd Al-Qarni was arrested by members of Ta'az political security as he was heading to a festival in Aden. It is alleged that the arrest came as a result of "higher orders." It seems to have been a politically motivated response to Al-Qarni's position against corruption in the country. On 6 April citizens demonstrating against the arrest in Ta'az were reportedly beaten and journalists covering the protest were harassed.

A day earlier, the Minister of Information Hassan Al-Lawzi issued a decree to cancel the licence of the private independent weekly, *Al-Wasat*, for allegedly "threatening national unity, spreading propaganda and harming the overarching interests of the country." This comes one month after the ban of the newspaper *Al-Sabah* for the same reason.

Yemen has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and is legally required, under international law, to respect the right of its citizens to freedom of expression as guaranteed under Article 19 of the ICCPR. In 2006, under the National Reform Agenda, the Yemeni government made further commitments to freedom of expression and to the creation of a diverse and pluralistic media environment. These steps have often been cited as an example for the region.

"The latest measures taken by the Government cast additional doubts on the country's continued commitment to its reform agenda and to protecting media diversity and freedom of expression. The positive trends recorded two years ago are being reversed." said Agnes Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director. *"We call on the Yemeni authorities to return to its original*

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commitments and implement all measures it had committed to implement under the reform Agenda.”

In particular, ARTICLE 19 calls on the Yemeni government to:

- Carry out effective independent investigations into threats and attacks against Ms. Tawakul Karman and journalists at the scene of the demonstration in Ta'az, make the findings public and bring those responsible to justice.
- Put an end to all restrictive policies and practices that limit freedom of expression, such as banning newspapers and websites from publication.
- Immediately release Mr. Fahd Al-Qarni: ARTICLE 19 considers that Mr. Fahd Al-Qarni was solely arrested for the peaceful expression of his views on a matter of public interest. As such, and until and unless charges and further information are brought to public attention, the arrest of Mr. Fahd Al-Qarni is unjustified. If the Security Forces decide to prosecute him, they should charge Mr. Fahd Al-Qarni under a recognisable crime so as to allow for a proper defence to be established, and justice to be sought.

NOTES TO EDITORS

- For more information, please contact **Sarah Richani, ARTICLE 19 MENA Programme Officer**, sarah@article19.org
- For in depth information about the situation of freedom of expression in Yemen check ARTICLE 19's report Yemen: Freedom of Expression in Peril available in English <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/yemen-foereport.pdf> and in Arabic at <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/yemen-foereport-arabic.pdf>. The report was made possible with the funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (N.E.D.)
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression.