

Algerian journalists jailed

Two newspaper journalists have been jailed in a libel case; another manhandled and placed under investigation.

Algiers – Two Algerian journalists working for the *El Watan* newspaper have been given two-month prison sentences in a libel case. Media watchdog organisation, Reporters Without Borders, has expressed its outrage and said it was also concerned about the verdict that is due to be issued by an Algiers criminal court on 30 May in the case of Arezki Aït-Larbi, the correspondent of several international news media.

"Algeria's journalists will always work under the threat of being thrown in prison until press offences are decriminalized, and since the highest authorities continue to drag their heels on amending the law, we appeal to judges handling press cases to display courage and independence by protecting journalists and reestablishing the right to news and information."

The two *El Watan* journalists sentenced to two months in prison were editor Omar Belhouchet and reporter Chawki Amari, who were also fined 1 million dinars (about US\$15,000). They immediately appealed against the verdict.

The case was a retrial of one held before a court in Jijel, 360km east of Algiers, in December 2006, when they received three-month sentences for libelling and insulting the city's prefect in an article a few months earlier, accusing him of corruption. They were able to get a retrial because the original trial was held in their absence and without their knowledge, and they were not even notified of the prefect's suit.

Decision deplored

Their lawyer, Zoubair Soudani, told Reporters Without Borders the case continued to suffer from procedural irregularities. He also deplored a recent Supreme Court decision that allows plaintiffs who are suing newspapers to present their suit not only at the place of distribution but also at the place of publication.

In another development, Jamal Belkadi, *El Watan's* correspondent in Constantine, 290km east of Algiers, was manhandled by the head of the prefect's security department while taking photos of the scene of a bombing on 16 May. His camera was confiscated and returned two days later. To his surprise, he was summoned to the prefect's office and was notified that he is being investigated for "crossing a security perimeter." He is due to appear before a judge soon. Other journalists present at the scene of the bombing were ignored.

The case involving Aït-Larbi, the correspondent of the French daily *Le Figaro* and *Ouest-France*, is also a retrial, to make up for one held in his absence and without his knowledge. It concerns a libel suit brought by a prison governor whom he accused of mistreating detainees in a 1994 article. Aït-Larbi did not discover that he had been convicted until May 2006, when he applied for a new passport and his request was initially refused. In April 2007, he found himself being arrested at

Algiers airport under a warrant issued in 1997.

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