

Human Rights Defenders in Sudan at risk

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Amnesty International and EHAHRDP press conference on Sudan

The Khartoum government's current clampdown on Sudanese human rights defenders is alarming.

Being a human rights defender in Sudan, and especially in the western region of Darfur, has always posed significant challenges.

These challenges have become more acute following the issuance of an arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court on 4 March 2009 against the Sudanese President Omer Hassan Al-Bashir

Following the announcement, the Sudanese National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) launched a campaign of intimidation against human rights activists in Sudan, particularly in Darfur and Khartoum, notably against those seen as speaking out in favour of justice for the victims in Darfur or seen as supporting the work of the ICC.

The campaign has involved the closure of three national Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and all their branches notably the Khartoum Center for Human Rights and Environmental Development (KCHRED), the Amal Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture and Sudan Social Development Organization (SUDO).

In the case of the Khartoum Centre, which is the country's leading national human rights organisation, its bank accounts were frozen in February and by early March the Humanitarian Assistance Committee (HAC) was calling for the registration of the organisation to be revoked ending almost a year of intensive pressure on this organisation.

In all three cases, NISS forces arbitrarily entered the premises of the organisations without warning and confiscated all of the property, including confidential files, and intimidated staff.

Legal appeals are currently underway to contest the closures of these organisations.

The fate of these organisations are merely the more visible cases of a much wider spread reality and part of a series of the government actions aimed at clamping-down and silencing activism deemed a threat to its authority notably activism seen as supporting the work of the ICC or at risk of providing the ICC with key evidence.

The arrest of three leading human rights defenders, Mr. Amir Mohamed Suliman, chairperson of the Khartoum Centre, Mr. Monim Elgak, and Mr Osman Hummaida , last November, was another poignant example of the lengths at which the government is prepared to go to ensure that

the investigations by the ICC are thwarted and that all forms of independent and critical voices are silenced.

Following their arrest the three defenders were interrogated on their human rights activities and their assumed engagement with the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigations and Mr. Elgak and Mr. Hummaida were tortured.

The independent media has also been targeted.

Independent newspaper has faced daily pre-print censorship by the NISS; several newspapers have been suspended, one has been closed down. Journalists deemed too critical notably those speaking out against government restrictions have been repeatedly arrested and harassed.

These attacks are of particular concern given the political context in Sudan notably in light of the investigation by the ICC as well as the forthcoming national elections that had been planned for 2009, but have recently been re-scheduled for February 2010.

The Darfur conflict, the situation in Abyei and the implementation process of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement are other current issues which also risk to be negatively affected by this recent clampdown.

In fact, given this political reality the work of human rights activists and in particular their watchdog role in this country are more essential now than ever before in order to ensure that the government is held to account for its actions and abides by its national and international responsibilities.

And yet most national human rights organisations have either been closed or rendered more or less demobilised as activists are continually monitored, harassed, and the everyday running of organisations made more or less impossible.

The main perpetrators of these attacks are members of the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) who have been granted extensive powers by outdated legislation which is at odds with Sudan's Interim National Constitution.

Of particular concern is the lack of protection available to human rights organisations and defenders on the ground.

Sudanese civil society organisations were once amongst the most buzzing, established, diverse and active ones in the region and were ready to speak out when their colleagues were at risk or facing excessive pressure.

Nowadays they are increasingly unable to offer each other this support and protection.

EHAHRDP therefore calls on the Sudanese authorities:

- To immediately repeal their decision to close down the Khartoum Centre, the Amal Centre and SUDO
- To bring an immediate end to the harassment, targeting of and restrictions being placed on Sudanese human rights defenders
- To guarantee the rights of freedom of association and expression
- To amend or revoke all laws which are at odds with Sudanese national law, notably with the Interim Constitution, and the country's international legal obligations

EHAHRDP calls on the international community, and the African Union in particular:

- To strongly condemn the current clampdown on human rights defenders and their rights in Sudan
- To call for the immediate reversal of the closure of the Khartoum Centre, Amal Centre and SUDO
- To use its influence to ensure the implementation of key provisions of the Interim National Constitution
- To pressure and use diplomatic measures to ensure that the Sudanese government complies with the provisions of the UN Declaration on HRDs
- To offer support to national human rights defenders both in Sudan and outside of the country so that they can carry on with their vital work

Thank you,

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