

H.E. Mr. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi  
President of the Arab Republic of Egypt

23 June 2014

Excellency,

The International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) strongly condemns the arbitrary arrest and detention of 23 activists, including seven women human rights defenders (**Yara Sallam, Sanaa Seif, Hanan Mustafa Mohamed, Salwa Mihriz, Samar Ibrahim, Nahid Sherif and Fikreya Mohamed**) on 21 June 2014, and calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

The seven women human rights defenders were arrested for conducting a peaceful protest against Egypt's problematic assembly law in Heliopolis, Cairo. Unknown actors threw stones and glass at the defenders, which was followed by the use of tear gas and bird shots by the police to disperse them. The women human rights defenders were arrested along with several others and were being held at Heliopolis police station, before being referred to prosecution.

We are disturbed to learn that today, on 23 June 2014, the prosecution ordered the continued detention of 23 defendants, including the seven women human rights defenders, for a further 4 days on pre-trial detention pending investigation. We are equally disturbed to know that one of the defendants, Yara Sallam, was not in the protest at the time of the arrest but is being held in custody after admitting that she works as a researcher at a national human rights organization.

The group of women human rights defenders face charges under provisions of the Penal Code and Law 107/2013 on the Right to Public Meetings, Processions and Peaceful Demonstrations in Public Places, particularly relating to breaching the protest law, sabotaging public properties, participating in a march aiming to breach public order, possessing inflammable materials, and taking part in an act with the objective of terrorizing the public. On 30 May 2014, we joined many of our partners in a letter to member and observer States of the UN Human Rights Council expressing deep concern over the provisions of Law 107/2013. We reiterate that this law is extremely restrictive, falls far short of meeting international human rights standards, and is being applied disproportionately to silence dissent by targeting human rights defenders, journalists, political activists and opposition figures.

As such, we urge that the prosecution drop all charges against all those detained solely for the exercise of their rights to the freedom of expression, association and assembly in order to facilitate their immediate and unconditional release. We further urge the Egyptian authorities to cease unequivocally the ongoing practice of arrest and prosecution of demonstrators exercising their rights under the pretext of violating the assembly law and related legislation. Additionally, we stress that there is an urgent need to amend the laws pertaining to assemblies to bring them in line with international standards.

Notwithstanding that peaceful protestors should not be arrested in the first place for exercising their rights, we are extremely worried that in the event that these seven women human rights defenders

face trial, they will be subject to a judicial system whose independence and effectiveness has been questioned by human rights experts at the international and regional levels. We stress that the detainees must be afforded full due process rights, as well as the opportunity to mount a meaningful defense in an independent and impartial trial, in line with Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Moreover, we are concerned that many women who participate in Egypt's political transition have faced particular threats and vulnerabilities, such as sexual harassment and sexual violence against women protestors and women detainees. We strongly call on the government to Egypt to ensure that women are protected from all forms of violence and discrimination, including when seeking to participate in political processes to strengthen democracy and the rule of law.

We recall the concern expressed by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights about the difficult environment in which human rights defenders, especially women human rights defenders, work which is characterized in many countries in the region by arbitrary arrest and detention, acts of harassment (including judicial harassment), threats and other forms of intimidation.<sup>1</sup> We call on the Egyptian authorities to ensure that the seven women human rights defenders are protected in line with the recommendations outlined in the report of the African Commission on the protection of women human rights defenders adopted at its 15<sup>th</sup> extraordinary session in March this year.

Yours sincerely,

Mr. Philip Lynch  
Director  
International Service for Human Rights

*Annex: Open letter to member and observer States of the UN Human Rights Council on addressing the situation of human rights in Egypt at the 26<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Council*

Cc. H.E. Mr. Ibrahim Mahlab, Prime Minister

Cc. H.E. Mr. Mahfouz Saber, Minister of Justice

Cc. H.E. Mr. Sameh Shoukry, Minister of Foreign Affairs

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<sup>1</sup> African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Resolution 230: "Resolution on the Need for a Study on the Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders in Africa", 52<sup>nd</sup> Ordinary Session, Côte d'Ivoire, 22 October 2012