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## **Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders Sweeps Arab Region: Seeds of Repression Planted in Year of Revolution**

### **Press Statement**

The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) hails the courageous work of the many human rights defenders in the Arab region who were - and still are - one of the locomotives for change. 2011 has been marked as a year of hope instigated by the Arab uprisings which called for more freedoms and liberties and an end to corruption and human rights violations. Yet this year of revolution is ending with looming consequences for Arab human rights defenders across the region who, as a result of their work, continue to be subjected to unchecked attacks and repression.

Tactics such as arbitrary arrests and detention based on trumped-up charges continue to be wielded against activists, bloggers, and rights defenders. Accusations such as "conspiracy against the state with foreign powers," "insulting top officials," "disturbance of public peace" and "involvement in terrorist activity" are among the now-famous charges often used to silence opposing voices and those demanding respect for human life and dignity. 2011 has been characterized by massive reprisals against human rights defenders, including detentions and trials, arbitrary arrests, torture and other forms of physical abuse, house and office raids, confiscation of belongings, and restrictions on their freedom of movement. The past month alone has witnessed a massive crackdown on several prominent activists and organizations across the region.

In the UAE, fabricated charges such as "insulting the president and top officials" were used by authorities in June, 2011 to arrest a group of five bloggers, activists, and prominent rights defenders, amongst whom is Ahmed Mansouri, prominent blogger and member of Human Rights Watch's Middle East advisory committee. The defendants were sentenced on November 27, 2011 to between 2-3 years in prison. Although the President commuted the sentences and all were released the following day, the convictions were not expunged, and thus the activists remain with criminal records which might pose difficulties for them in the future, especially should they choose to demand more freedoms and political reforms in their country once more.

Similarly, in Sudan, 14 Darfurians working for Radio Dabanga, which reports on Darfur, were arrested in October, 2010 on charges of conspiracy against the state and espionage and reportedly tortured while in detention. Amongst them was prominent human rights lawyer Abdelrahman Al-Gassim. Even after their acquittal on December 4, 2011, fear to re-arrest some of the activists for some charges that have not been dropped continues to act as a tool of intimidation.

In Bahrain, and as the report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry outlines major human rights violations committed against peaceful protesters and those who supported them during mass demonstrations earlier this year, Abdulhadi Alkhawaja, former head of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) and Front Line Defenders Middle East coordinator remains in detention since his arrest on April 9, 2011, and after he was sentenced to life in prison by an

exceptional tribunal based on trumped-up charges of terrorist activity. He was severely tortured and threatened with rape while in detention. Abdulghani Khanjar, the head of the Committee of Victims of Torture, and recognized blogger Ali Adulemam, were also sentenced to 15 years in prison and life imprisonment respectively on similar charges. Both defenders are currently in hiding.

Additional forms of intimidation against human rights defenders in Bahrain include an ongoing intimidation and smear campaign and death threats by ex-state security official, known for his connection with the government, against Nabeel Rajab, president of BCHR, Mohamed Al Maskati, president of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights, and Youssef Al Mahafdha, board member of the BCHR. The three defenders are among the few remaining advocates of human rights and freedoms inside Bahrain.

In Egypt, and as the clamp-down on freedoms reached its peak following 11 months of rule by the Military Council, prominent Egyptian blogger and outspoken critic of human rights violations committed under military rule Alaa Abdelfattah remains in detention pending investigation after being brought before military judiciary following his arrest on October 30, 2011. Although his case was later transferred to the High State Security Prosecution, and an investigating judge was reported to handle the case, he remains in detention on fabricated criminal charges which even include terrorist activity related to the Maspero Massacre, of which the ruling Military Council is considered one of the main perpetrators.

Other intimidation tactics include smear and defamation campaigns against active human rights organizations.

Following the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution in Egypt, civil society organizations in the country have been targeted by an unprecedented smear campaign in state-owned media outlets, which have accused rights organizations of crimes such as high treason, conspiracy against the state, and compromising national security through the implementation of foreign agendas due to their acceptance of foreign funding. The government has repeatedly announced investigations into the funding of civil society organizations, including by requesting that the Central Bank monitor all their bank transactions and reveal the NGOs' private bank information. The government was also reported to order the freeze of some group's bank accounts. If sentenced, human rights activists could face between 6 months and 20 years of imprisonment.

Similarly, in Algeria, freedom of association will be further restricted if a proposed law on associations is adopted. Under this law, administrative authorities would have the power to reject the establishment of any association if its purposes are deemed to contradict public orders and morality or other laws and regulations. The bill would also restrict the receipt of foreign donations and grants, thus significantly restricting the capacity of associations. Partnerships between Algerian associations and organizations based abroad could also be opposed by the Ministry of Interior.

As for Syria, in the midst of the bloodiest revolution the "Arab Spring" has witnessed, thousands of protesters have become human rights defenders par excellence, documenting violations and risking their lives to reveal to the world what amounts to Crimes Against Humanity being committed against mostly unarmed civilians. There are hundreds of human rights advocates amongst the over 5,000 killed and thousands more held in incommunicado detention, yet an accurate count has become almost impossible. It is worth mentioning that almost all recognized human rights defenders who were unable to flee Syria as the events erupted have been subjected to harassment and intimidation. Indeed, the arrest of prominent blogger and media officer the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression Razan Ghazzawy on December 4, 2011 as she was attempting to enter Jordan to attend a conference

for Arab activists, is just one example of this massive crackdown of human rights defenders occurring in the country.

CIHRS continues to express, in the strongest terms, its full support and solidarity with human rights defenders across the Arab region. As words fail to describe the truly dire human rights situation across the region, it is the words of Razan, which she wrote shortly before her arrest, which bear witness to the heroic acts of human rights defenders who continue their work despite such appalling circumstances: "If anything happens to me, know that the regime does not fear those imprisoned- but those who don't forget them".