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## Egypt – Ongoing Judicial Harassment of Human Rights Defenders

On 19 November, the crackdown on the Egyptian human rights movement continued to escalate. The Qasr El-Nil Misdemeanour's Court in Cairo issued Egyptian human rights defender and prominent journalist Mr. **Khaled Elbalshy**, and two of his colleagues, Yehia Qalash and Gamal Abdul-Rahim, to a two-year prison sentence on charges of harbouring journalists who were wanted by Egyptian authorities for expressing critical views against the government. In a separate incident Egyptian authorities banned Ms. **Azza Soliman** from travelling to Jordan from Cairo International airport to participate in a training on human rights. On 17 November, Azza Soliman's personal and organisational bank accounts were frozen by judicial order.

[Khaled Elbalshy](#) is a prominent journalist and board member of Egypt's Press Syndicate and the Head of its Freedoms Committee. He is also the Chief Editor of the private Al-Bedaiah online newspaper. [Azza Soliman](#) is a prominent lawyer and the head of **Lawyers for Justice and Peace (LJP)**, an organisation that provides legal assistance for Egyptian human rights defenders. She is also the founder of the **Center for Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA)** and is currently serving on its board of trustees. CEWLA is a feminist organisation that campaigns to promote gender equality, focusing in particular on legislative reform and awareness-raising.

On 19 November, the Qasr El-Nil Misdemeanour's Court sentenced Egypt's Press Syndicate President Yehia Qalash, Secretary General Gamal Abdul-Rahim, and Head of the Freedoms Committee Khaled Elbalshy to two-years imprisonment on alleged charges of sheltering two other journalists wanted by Egyptian authorities for expressing critical views about the government. Yehia Qalash, Gamal Abdul-Rahim and Khaled Elbalshy are currently out on bail, pending appeal. In a statement following the sentence, human rights defender Khaled Elbalshy urged journalists not to be discouraged from continuing their work by this verdict. He then highlighted that there are 28 journalists currently serving prison sentences in Egypt. [On 29 May 2016](#), Egyptian authorities detained the human rights defender on charges of "disseminating false news and rumours" and "sheltering criminals". Downtown Cairo Prosecution granted the human rights defender EGP10,000 bail, which was paid. He was subsequently released pending trial on 4 June 2016.

On 19 November, while Azza Soliman was at Cairo International airport, Egyptian authorities informed her that she had been issued with a travel ban by judicial order on 17 November. No clarification was provided as to why the order had been issued. She is planning to file a report to the Egyptian Attorney General in order to investigate the legal grounds for the travel ban. This is not the first time that the human rights defender has been subjected to judicial harassment. Azza Soliman was a witness to the murder of activist Shaimaa ElSabbagh, who was killed while peacefully protesting on 24 January 2015. In March 2015, the Qasr El Nile Prosecution Office in Cairo changed Azza Soliman's status from being a witness to the killing of Shaimaa ElSabbagh to a defendant, accused of protesting illegally. She was acquitted of the charges, which the prosecutor subsequently appealed. However, Azza Soliman's acquittal was upheld in October 2015. On 17 November, Azza Soliman found that both her personal and LJP's organisational bank accounts had been frozen by judicial order on the basis of her involvement in the 2011 foreign funding case, also known as Case No. 173. Since 2011, 37 Egyptian rights organisations have faced charges under this case, with some leaders and staff members of human rights

organizations charged with “receipt of illegal foreign funding” and “working without legal permission”. [On 17 September 2016](#), In connection with this case, an Egyptian court approved a freeze on the assets of five prominent human rights defenders and three leading human rights NGOs. And in May 2016, five other human rights defenders were banned from travel in a wave of harassment against the Egyptian human rights movement.

The judicial harassment against Azza Soliman and Khaled Elbalsby come at a time when Egypt seems to be institutionalising its crackdown on human rights defenders. On 15 November, a highly restrictive draft NGO law was approved by Egyptian parliament for review before the Egyptian Council. The proposed law threatens to imprison human rights defenders and NGO staff from one to five years and fine them between EGP50,000 and EGP1,000,000 if they inter alia facilitate or participate in activities carried out by international organisations without authorisation of the Egyptian authorities, or if they carry out field research and public polls in their capacity as civil society without prior consent. The proposed law would also grant Egyptian authorities control over the establishment of Egyptian NGOs and would also require international NGOs to register with the Egyptian authorities. The draft law also gives Egyptian authorities the power to dictate the location and headquarters of civil society operations, and proposes to imprison human rights defenders for up to one year and fine them between EGP20,000 and EGP500,000 for carrying out “crimes” such as moving the headquarters of the organisation to a place other than what had been previously authorised. The proposed law also places individual liability on government staff members that authorise the work of NGOs in contravention with the aforementioned draft law.

Front Line Defenders condemns the criminalization of civil society in Egypt, including through the imposition of travel bans, the blocking of human rights organisations’ bank accounts and the freezing of their assets. Front Line Defenders calls for an immediate end to the persecution of human rights defenders, reiterating their essential role in the development of a just and equal society, and is also deeply concerned by the new restrictive draft NGO law recently approved by Egyptian Parliament.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Egypt to:**

1. Drop all charges against Khaled Elbalsby and his colleagues as Front Line Defenders believes the journalists has been targeted solely as a result of its legitimate human rights activities;
2. Immediately and unconditionally remove the travel ban imposed against Azza Soliman and all other human rights defenders facing travel restrictions in Egypt, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being restricted solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
3. Refrain from adopting the draft NGO law introduced on 14 November before the Egyptian Parliament as it would severely hamper the work of human rights organisations in Egypt;
4. Cease targeting all human rights organisations and human rights defenders in Egypt and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.