

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Frank Smyth, and I am the Washington, D.C., representative of the Committee to Protect Journalists. I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak to you today.

CPJ continues to monitor and document a pattern of media restrictions in the countries that are the focus of today's discussion. However, due to time constraints, I will concentrate my talk on Tunisia and Morocco, two countries with the dubious distinction of being the only Arab countries that, according to CPJ's records, currently imprison journalists for their work. What's more, I have decided to specifically deal with press freedom abuses in Tunisia and Morocco because both countries are considered close, dependable allies of the United States.

In the Arab world, where journalists have long suffered under repressive regimes, Tunisia's press freedom record has stood out as particularly appalling. Since President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's ascent to power in 1987, Tunisian journalists who have criticized the regime have been harassed, threatened, imprisoned, physically attacked, and censored. Two Tunisian journalists are currently in prison: Zouhair Yahyaoui and Hamadi Jebali.

Yahyaoui, a 34-year-old Internet journalist, has been in jail since June 2002. He was sentenced to two years in prison for allegedly publishing false information and using "stolen communication lines" to post his Web site, *TUNeZINE.com*. But Yahyaoui's only offense was to post chat forums and articles critical of the Tunisian government and President Ben Ali. One item that angered Tunisian authorities was an open letter from Yahyaoui's uncle, dissident judge Mokhtar Yahyaoui, to the president decrying the lack of judicial independence in the country. In the weeks prior to his arrest, Yahyaoui posted an online poll satirizing President Ben Ali's 2002 referendum, which allowed him to run for an unprecedented fourth presidential term.

Since his arrest, Yahyaoui has staged numerous hunger strikes to protest inhumane prison conditions. Prison guards have confiscated his books and writing materials, and Yahyaoui has told his family that the guards often tamper with his food, making it inedible.

Jebali, a former editor of *Al-Fajr*, the weekly newspaper of the banned Islamist Al-Nahda party, was sentenced to one year in prison in 1991 after *Al-Fajr* published an article calling for the abolition of military courts in Tunisia. A year later, while still in jail, he was tried and sentenced to an additional 16 years in prison by a military court, accused of belonging to the outlawed Al-Nahda party. Jebali was convicted of "aggression with the intention of changing the nature of the state" and "membership in an illegal organization."

CPJ has noted an alarming and disturbing trend in Morocco, a country that one does not usually associate with chronic press freedom abuses. Since May, five Moroccan journalists have been detained in connection with their work, and two remain imprisoned, Ali Lmrabet and Mohammed Al-Herd. This sharp deterioration in press freedom seems due in part to Morocco's attempts to confront terrorism. The thrust of the crackdown began after the May 16 terrorist attacks in Casablanca, which killed 44 people. An anti-terror law passed soon after the attacks has been repeatedly used to detain reporters who have written about militancy in the country.

Lmrabet, the owner and editor of two maverick weeklies, the French-language *Demain* and its Arabic-language sister publication, *Douman*, was jailed on May 21 after a court found him guilty of "insulting the king," "undermining the monarchy," and "challenging the territorial integrity of the state." He was sentenced to four years in prison and fined 20,000 Moroccan dirhams (or about US\$2,000). On appeal, the sentence was reduced to three years. The court also ordered the two weeklies closed. Lmrabet's conviction stemmed from articles and cartoons published in the two magazines, including an interview with Abdullah Zaazaa, an opponent of Morocco's monarchy who called for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara; an article about the royal court's finances; and a cartoon that criticized public displays of reverence to the monarchy. Lmrabet staged a 50-day hunger strike to protest the legal case against him.

Al-Herd, editor of the weekly *Al-Sharq*, was detained along with several other journalists under Morocco's new anti-terror law. Al-Herd was arrested on June 12 and charged with "extolling the actions that comprise terrorism." *Al-Sharq* editor Abdel Majid Ben Taher and Mustapha Qashnini, editor of the weekly *Al-Hayat Al-Maghribiya*, were also taken into custody and similarly charged. In August, Al-Herd was sentenced to three years in prison, while Ben Taher and Qashnini, who were released pending trial, were each sentenced to a year in prison. Ben Taher and Qashnini are still free pending appeal, while al-Herd remains in prison. The court also suspended both weeklies for three months. The charges against all three men came in response to an article published in the May 5-20 edition of *Al-Hayat Al-Maghribiya* by an Islamist activist that was reprinted on June 5 in *Al-Sharq*. In the article, the author discussed the history of the Islamist movement in Morocco and its alleged relationship with the country's intelligence services.

One other journalist in Morocco was given a one-year suspended prison sentence, and CPJ has documented other cases of harassment and abuse.

While both Tunisia and Morocco are considered allies of the Bush administration, in its eagerness to encourage democratization in the Middle East, the United States cannot turn a blind eye to these flagrant human rights abuses. After all, the United States must remember that the fundamental right of a free press is a crucial element to democracy.

Thank you.