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Algeria: Authorities shut down TV channel

This week's raids on an Algerian TV station and its subsequent closure on Wednesday are a worrying sign for freedom of expression ahead of presidential elections next month, Amnesty International said today.

Al-Atlas TV was raided three times this week and forced off air on 12 March 2014. It had extensively covered the arrest of dozens of peaceful protesters during last week's pre-elections demonstrations and had been critical of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's intention to run for a fourth presidential term.

Amnesty International fears that Al-Atlas TV is being punished for the channel's coverage of protests and criticism of the authorities. The organization is calling on the authorities to allow the station to reopen and to refrain from arbitrarily closing other media outlets.

On the afternoon of 11 March, nine gendarmes in plain clothes raided the headquarters of Al-Atlas TV in the Birkhadem neighbourhood of the capital Algiers. Employees told Amnesty International that the gendarmes searched the offices for four hours, prevented staff from leaving the premises, and confiscated dozens of video cameras and audio recorders. The same afternoon, gendarmes also reportedly raided the channel's studios in Baba Ali, south of the capital, where they seized equipment before sealing off the premises.

On 12 March, Al-Atlas TV's broadcasting was interrupted without notification. In the afternoon, the channel's headquarters were raided again by dozens of gendarmes who seized recording and computing devices including personal phones and laptops belonging to journalists and technicians. Gendarmes raided the premises once more the following day, confiscating other electronic equipment and cutting off internet communications.

Al-Atlas TV's editorial and information director, journalist Hafnaoui Ghoul, was arrested on 1 March in Algiers for his involvement in peaceful protests against President Bouteflika's bid for a fourth term in office, before being released the same day. He had previously been imprisoned for six months in 2004 for allegedly defaming local officials in Djefla, where he was a member of the local branch of the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (Ligue algérienne de défense des droits de l'homme, LADDH). At the time, Amnesty International adopted him as a prisoner of conscience.

Algerian legislation currently only allows for state-controlled national television channels. Private Algerian television channels have circumvented this ban by broadcasting via satellite from abroad; Al-Atlas TV records material in Algeria, but broadcasts out of Jordan. This situation has generally been tolerated since 2011 and, in some cases, private channels have been issued with temporary licences by the Ministry of Communications. According to the newspaper's lawyers, such licences can be revoked at any time without the possibility for appeal. Al-Atlas TV was reportedly issued such a licence in 2013 and, upon applying for an extension for 2014, was informed that such a renewal was not necessary given that a new audiovisual media law to regulate private television channels would soon come into force. The law was passed by Algeria's parliament and senate in January but has yet to be promulgated.

Amnesty International urges the Algerian authorities to lift undue restrictions on freedom of expression and to guarantee media freedoms in line with its international human rights obligations. As regards television channels, the organization urges the authorities not to arbitrarily restrict the free flow of information, and to ensure that any process that is established

for licensing or registering private television stations is fair, transparent and protects the right to free expression in full conformity with Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 9 of the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights.