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PRESS RELEASE

**Yemen: Controversial Special Court sentences journalists to jail and bans them from writing**

**ARTICLE 19 expresses grave concern over prison sentences handed to two Yemeni journalists by the Special Court this week for expressing their opinion in print.**

On January 17, Moaz Al-Ashihabi, a journalist for the *Al Thaqafieh* newspaper was taken to central prison following a Special Court sentence of one-year's imprisonment for writing an article that "infringes on the Islamic faith". Al-Ashihabi, is also banned from writing for one year.

A day earlier, on January 16, female writer Anisa Othman was sentenced to three months in jail for writing an article deemed offensive to state President Ali Abdullah Saleh in the weekly *Al-Wasat* newspaper. The court also banned Anisa from practicing journalism for one year.

The sentences were met by widespread protest and letters of condemnation from across Yemeni civil society. The Yemeni Journalists Syndicate said in a statement issued yesterday: "*The ruling (against Al-Ashihabi) sets a dangerous precedent against writers and journalists. This clearly shows that the Court is merely a punitive tool used against the media.*"

The controversial Special Court for Journalists was established in May 2009, following a decision by the Yemen Ministry of Information to suspend eight leading newspapers.

The government argued, through the state-run Saba news agency, that press cases necessitate experienced and specialized judges who understand the role of the press and appreciate the mission of press and journalists. It insisted that the court would be more efficient as it would try all press related cases in one place in the capital Sana'a. However, the Special Court was a shock to the vocal Yemeni media and activists who viewed the court as another means of muzzling the press and intimidating journalists. Journalists have been staging protests demanding the abolition of the court, which they consider as unconstitutional, and the end to unjustified restrictions on freedom of expression.

*“At a difficult time for Yemen, the court’s ruling is deeply disappointing,” says Dr. Agnès Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director “Journalists should not be tried in Special Courts and prison sentences should never be passed on journalists for expressing their opinion.”*

**NOTES TO EDITORS:**

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.