

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/oman-muscat-based-newspaper-closed-13-08-2011,40783.html>

Middle East & North Africa - Oman

Imminent trial

Muscat-based newspaper closed, journalists facing trial over article about justice ministry

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Reporters Without Borders has written to Sultan Qaboos, Oman's head of state, expressing deep concern at tomorrow's trial of **Yousef Al-Haj**, a journalist with the Muscat-based daily *Al-Zaman*, as a result of a complaint by justice minister Mohamed Al-Hanai about article published on 14 May.

In its letter, sent on 11 August, Reporters Without Borders voiced amazement at the range and scale of the charges brought against Al-Haj in response to the article, which quoted a justice ministry employee's allegations about growing corruption within the ministry and favouritism in promotions.

"The proceedings are out of all proportion to the gravity of the offence and we call for their immediate withdrawal," the letter said. *"We fear that Yousef Al-Haj will not have time to organize his defence for the first hearing and will not get a fair trial."*

After being summoned at short notice for interrogation at the prosecutor's office on 5 July, without having time to notify a lawyer, Al-Haj was charged with:

- insulting the justice ministry
- insulting the justice minister and his under-secretary
- trying to create divisions within Omani society
- violating article 60 of the civil code (the publications law)
- working as a journalist without a permit.

Reporters Without Borders has been told that *Al-Zaman* editor Ibrahim Al-Mo'amari had applied for press cards for his journalists and had obtained the requested accreditation for all of them except Al-Haj.

On returning to the newspaper after his interrogation on 5 July, Al-Haj was surprised to find he had been banned by the information ministry from writing any further articles for publication. The ban is still in force. He had been interrogated by the police three times in the past without being banned.

The Reporters Without Borders letter also advised against closing *Al-Zaman* in response to an order issued by a Muscat court in connection with the case. *"It would be regrettable if the Omani courts upheld this decision, which would violate freedom of the press and would give credence to the journalist's allegedly defamatory claims."* The newspaper has nonetheless been closed.

The president of *Al-Zaman*'s board, its editor and one of its design editors are also to be tried tomorrow on a charge of illegally employing Al-Haj without a permit from the information ministry. Many journalists work without permits in Oman.
