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PRESS RELEASE

Iraq: IFJ and ARTICLE 19 Pledge Support for UK *Guardian* Newspaper in Defamation Case

ARTICLE 19, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the affiliated Iraqi journalists' union today called on the Iraqi authorities to drop charges of defamation against the British *Guardian* newspaper and its journalist, Ghaith Abdul-Ahad. The IFJ and ARTICLE 19 have filed a joint *amicus brief* to the Iraqi Appeal Court in advance of its hearing on 27 January.

In November 2009, an Iraqi court ordered the *Guardian* to pay a 100m dinar (£52,000) fine to the Prime Minister over a story published in April last year under the title “Six years after Saddam Hussein, Nouri al-Maliki tightens his grip on Iraq”.

The article quoted three anonymous members of the Iraqi Intelligence Services who alleged that the Prime Minister was running Iraqi affairs with a totalitarian hand, that the Iraqi government was close to the United States and that officials attached to the Iraqi national intelligence service were monitoring intelligence and military activities within the government itself.

The journalists were prosecuted under the Saddam-era Publications Law for reportedly defaming the Prime Minister and the Iraqi Intelligence Services. The court had also asked the newspaper and the journalist to disclose the names and contact details of the three officers. They refused.

The court commissioned a report from a group of three experts nominated by the Iraqi Union of Journalists, who concluded the article was not defamatory and thus no compensation should be granted.

The court disregarded this testimony and instead followed the opinion of a second panel who argued that the *Guardian* had violated the Publications Law by interfering in Iraqi internal affairs and harmed the reputation of the Prime Minister.

“At the heart of this case is the fight for independent journalism and for protection of sources in Iraq,” says Aidan White, IFJ General Secretary. *“We urge the Iraqi authorities to drop the charges and to put media law reform on their agenda.”*

The *amicus brief* filed by ARTICLE 19 and the IFJ reviews international standards for freedom of expression and argues that the court ruling disregarded well-established international law which guarantees the rights of the media to critically evaluate the activities of governments and their elected leaders. The Republic of Iraq has an obligation to protect the right to free speech in terms of its commitments to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Arab Charter on Human Rights.

“The Iraqi government should be protecting journalists, not prosecuting them,” comments Dr Agnès Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director. *“Politicians need to be able to tolerate a greater degree of criticism and scrutiny than ordinary citizens, in the name of transparency and democratic process, and any attempts to interfere with the media’s right to report on politicians and public officials amounts to unacceptable censorship.”*

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- The Brief can be found at: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/analysis/iraq-alan-rusbridger-and-gaith-salim-abd-al-ahad.pdf>
- For more information from ARTICLE 19, please contact: Nicola Spurr, Senior Media Officer at nicola@article19.org, +44 20 7324 2500
- For more information from the IFJ, please contact Sarah Bouchetob, Arab World and Middle East Project Officer at sarah.bouchetob@ifj.org, +32 2 235 2205. The IFJ represents over 600,000 journalists in 125 countries worldwide.
- 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.