

UPDATE: DISSOLUTION OF THE ARAB WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY ASSOCIATION

Next Court Session Set for February 20

The Cairo-based Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) was ordered dissolved by an administrative decree dated June 15, 1991. The action was taken pursuant to the 1964 Law of Associations which regulates private voluntary organizations in Egypt. AWSA actively promotes women's rights in Egypt and the Arab world. The founder and president of AWSA, Dr. Nawal El-Saadawi, is a prominent author and women's rights advocate.

AWSA, represented by fifteen volunteer lawyers, is contesting the state's decision to dissolve the organization before the State Council Court, a three-judge administrative panel. AWSA has demanded an injunction against the dissolution order and its ultimate nullification. The first session of the proceedings was held on October 31, 1991, and the second session took place on December 5, 1991. The court will meet again on February 20, 1992.

In the proceedings on October 31, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the respondent to AWSA's petition, submitted a memorandum to the Court requesting that AWSA's application for relief be dismissed. The memorandum accuses AWSA of "perpetual violation of the law, making that perpetual violation one of its foremost ends." It cites several provisions of the associations law and of AWSA's own "basic regulations" (*al-qanoun al-asaasī* in Arabic, or by-laws in English) that allegedly were violated.

The memorandum states that after an investigation by a committee appointed in November 1990, "the administrative authority had no choice but to issue its decision ... that the society be dissolved and its property be handed over to the Society of Women in Islam." The decree to dissolve AWSA, the memorandum argues, was "based on law and facts, derived from established evidence and documents ... and aimed at the public interest by the preservation of public order, and safeguarding private and public funds."

The memorandum claims that "the documentary evidence submitted shows that the violations committed [by AWSA] were unquestionably flagrant and include violation of public order by dissemination of ideas running counter to the position of the State." Among AWSA's alleged violations are the following:

*** AWSA convened a conference on Women's Journalism from September 1 to 7, 1990 which "took a stand against the official and public stand of the government with regard to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq."¹**

*** AWSA issued a magazine called *Noun* and a periodical bulletin – the first issue of which appeared on May 1, 1991 -- "despite the fact that the Egyptian Higher Press Council refused to grant it permission."²**

On December 5, in a two-hour session, AWSA's lawyers presented a rebuttal of the charges and submitted legal memoranda to the State Council Court. The government then asked for a postponement until February 20, 1992.

In a September 1991 newsletter about AWSA's dissolution, Middle East Watch concluded that, in the absence of detailed reasons and persuasive supporting evidence for the administrative order, the Egyptian authorities' move was an arbitrary infringement of the right to freedom of association and freedom of expression, rights set forth in the Egyptian Constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Egypt has ratified. Middle East Watch's view is only strengthened by the allegations in the memorandum submitted to the State Council Court by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

*** * ***

In October, Middle East Watch, the Women's Rights Project of Human Rights Watch, and the Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights of the University of Cincinnati College of Law submitted an *amicus* brief to the State Council Court in support of AWSA. The brief argues that by dissolving the organization, which was legally registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs in 1985, Egypt violated its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Copies of the brief are available from Middle East Watch in New York and the Women's Rights Project of Human Rights Watch in Washington, D.C.

¹ In testimony to Middle East Watch, Dr. El-Saadawi said that the conference participants had discussed a wide range of issues, including the crisis in the Gulf resulting from Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait one month earlier. The conference voiced opposition both to the Iraqi invasion and to foreign intervention in the region, advocating an approach based on diplomacy and negotiation, rather than military force and war. Dr. El-Saadawi told Middle East Watch that in November 1990 AWSA received a letter from the director-general of the Ministry of Social Affairs, reminding the organization that under the 1964 associations law it was prohibited from discussing anything related to politics or religion.

² Organizations that wish to launch new periodicals or journals must submit applications to the Higher Press Council and obtain approval for publication. *Noun*, partially funded by UNESCO, addresses legal and social issues of concern to Egyptian women and promotes sexual equality. The Higher Press Council had denied AWSA's application to publish the journal as a quarterly magazine (because AWSA could not meet the requirement that funds be deposited in a national bank as a deposit, a requirement which applies to daily and weekly newspapers), so the organization issued *Noun* as an internal newsletter for members, deprived of the sales and advertising income that would have been generated had approval to publish been granted.

Letters protesting the dissolution of AWSA have been sent to the Egyptian authorities by a wide range of organizations and individuals, including Middle East Watch, the Women's Rights Project of Human Rights Watch, the co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, the chairman of the Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the U.S. House of Representatives, International Women's Rights Action Watch, the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, the Freedom-to-Write Committee of PEN American Center, and the American Friends Service Committee.

* * *

The next session of the State Council Court is scheduled for February 20, 1992. To express your concern about the dissolution of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, send politely worded letters or telegrams requesting a reversal of the order to dissolve the organization to:

**The Honorable Hosni Mubarak
President of the Arab Republic of Egypt
Office of the President
al-Etehatia Building
Heliopolis
Cairo, Arab Republic of Egypt**

**Secretary of State James Baker
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520**

**Ambassador El-Sayed Abdel Raouf El-Reedy
Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt
2310 Decatur Place, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20008**

Note: If you write a letter of appeal on behalf of a women's rights organization, please send a copy to Dorothy Q. Thomas, Director, Women's Rights Project, Human Rights Watch, 1522 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20005.

* * *

For additional information about AWSA and this case, request a copy of "Egyptian Government Moves to Dissolve Prominent Arab Women's Organization," published by Middle East Watch in September 1991.

For information contact: Virginia N. Sherry (212) 972-8400