

**For Immediate Release**

## **Egypt: Chirac Must Urge Release of Opposition Leader**

(Brussels, April 18, 2006) – When French President Jacques Chirac conducts a state visit to Cairo on Wednesday, he should urge President Hosni Mubarak to release Ayman Nur from prison and end persecution of the opposition leader, Human Rights Watch said today.

An Egyptian court in December sentenced Nur to five years in prison with forced labor on charges that he had forged signatures on the petition to register his Ghad (Tomorrow) Party a year earlier. In Egypt's first multi-candidate presidential election last September, Nur was the most vigorous critic of Mubarak, the incumbent, and received more votes than any other challenger. In the November-December parliamentary elections, Nur lost his seat to a former high-ranking state security official.

“President Mubarak is leading a shameful campaign to punish Ayman Nur for his aggressive political challenges,” said Joe Stork, deputy director of the Middle East and North Africa division at Human Rights Watch. “President Chirac should tell him that this persecution undermines Egypt's professed commitment to democratic reforms, and threatens improved relations with France.”

Nur's conviction came after a trial fraught with irregularities. A leading prosecution witness said before the court that his confession had been coerced under threats of torture. In late February, the state opened a new investigation against Nur on charges of “insulting the head of the NDP,” that is Mubarak, who heads the ruling National Democratic Party. The state also opened an investigation against his wife Gameela Ismail, correspondent for the U.S.-based weekly magazine *Newsweek*, on charges that she assaulted a state security official during a demonstration the day after her husband's conviction. Ismail denies the charges.

On April 9 during a visit from Ismail, prison officials refused to allow Nur to hand his wife a written complaint to an administrative court, and a column he had written for the Ghad Party newspaper. Nur told his wife that a few days earlier the head of the prison authority, General Mahmoud Wagdi, “advised” him to halt his criticisms of Mubarak and the president's son Gamal.

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