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CPJ calls on Sudan to end newspaper censorship

New York, June 7, 2010 – The Sudanese government should halt ongoing newspaper censorship, the Committee to Protect Journalists said today, after at least two papers failed to appear on newsstands over the weekend.

Sudanese authorities blocked printing of the opposition weekly *Al-Maidan* late Saturday after its staff failed to provide security personnel with an advance copy of the paper, *Al-Maidan* journalist Abdelgadir Mohammed Abdelgadir told CPJ.

Abdelgadir said government censors had become particularly sensitive to stories about an ongoing physicians' strike and talks in Kampala concerning the International Criminal Court. "In the past the red line was Darfur or human rights violations. Today, we have two additional topics: a doctor's strike and the ICC conference in Kampala," Abdelgadir said.

When a Sudanese security agent arrived at the newspaper's offices on Saturday to review an advance copy of the paper, *Al-Maidan* journalists told the officer that the edition had already gone to press. Security personnel, who act as government censors, then went to the printing facility and ordered production to stop, Abdelgadir told CPJ.

The independent daily *Ajras al-Huriya* did not go to press for three consecutive days, starting on Friday, because government censors used such a heavy hand, Faiz al-Silaik, the newspaper's acting editor-in-chief, told CPJ. So much content was being deleted, from literature to sports, that the newspaper would be compromised if it went to press, he said. Stories about the physicians' strike and the ICC talks were among those deleted.

"In Sudan, the security officer is the editor-in-chief," al-Silaik said. "He decides what runs in the paper and what doesn't." On Sunday, the newspaper announced that it will suspend publication for one week to protest the censorship, al-Silaik told CPJ.

Censorship has flared numerous times in recent years despite government promises to end the practice. Censorship was tightly enforced in February 2008 after some newspapers accused the Sudanese government of backing a failed coup in neighboring Chad. It intensified again after a Darfuri rebel group, the Justice and Equality Movement, attacked Omdurman in May 2008. And censorship flared once more after the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for President Omar al-Bashir in 2009, CPJ research shows.

"Khartoum has once again not kept its word when it comes to ending censorship of critical news," said CPJ Middle East and North Africa Program Coordinator Mohamed Abdel Dayem. "The Sudanese authorities have vowed to end prior censorship twice in the past year, but as last week's events illustrate, prior censorship remains a common

practice in Sudan."

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