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Attacks on the Press 2001

Middle East and
North Africa 2001

ALGERIA

Algeria's boisterous press has been at odds with president Abdel Aziz Bouteflika since he took office in 1999. In 2001, the animosity took a more serious turn when the government promulgated harsh new press legislation

In June, despite intense local and international protest, the Algerian Parliament approved a series of new amendments to the Penal Code that prescribe prison terms of up to one year and fines up to 250,000 dinars (US\$3,200) for defaming the president. A separate amendment imposes similar punishments for defaming Parliament, the courts, the military, or other state institutions. Writers, publishers, and responsible editors are held accountable for offending articles, along with publications themselves, which can be fined up to 2.5 million dinars (US\$32,000).

In an interview with the London-based daily *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Bouteflika explained that the amendments were a response to "aggressive journalism," echoing the complaints of other officials who claimed that the press persistently libeled them and government bodies.

Although authorities had not enforced the amendment's harsher penalties by year's end, journalists were prosecuted for criminal libel. In one case, journalist Faouzia Ababsa, managing editor of the French-language daily *L'Authentique*, was convicted of defaming the head of a private trade association and given a suspended six-month prison sentence and a 1,500 dinar (US\$20) fine.

Journalists must also contend with the controversial Information Code of 1990, which imposes jail sentences of five to 10 years for offenses such as publishing "false or misleading information" that harms "state security."

For the first time since Bouteflika took office, authorities banned a publication: the Arabic weekly *Al-Mouad* was suspended for six months after police seized copies of the paper from kiosks in late November without explanation. The action appeared to stem from an article about the 1999 assassination of Islamic Salvation Front leader Abdelkader Hachani, as well as another piece about an Islamist militant.

Ever since civil strife erupted between Islamist extremists and government forces a decade ago, Algeria's press has maintained its energy and vibrancy. However, it has yet to regain the diversity it enjoyed before the regime

closed newspapers that were affiliated with or sympathetic to the Islamic opposition.

Between 1993 and 1996, 58 reporters and editors were murdered in Algeria along with numerous other media workers. While Islamist militants were blamed for most of the killings, many local journalists suspect state involvement in some of the assassinations. The government's failure to conduct open investigations of the killings, or to allow independent international inquiries, leaves many questions unanswered. In 2000, Algerian Ministry of Justice officials reported that they had identified 20 of the journalists' killers and had sentenced 15 to death in absentia. These reports were impossible to verify, along with the government's contention that it had launched investigations into other murders.

The fate of "disappeared" journalists Djamel Eddine Fahassi and Aziz Bouabdallah remains unknown. Compelling evidence suggests that state security agents abducted the two in 1995 and 1997, respectively. Neither man has been seen since, and Algerian authorities have denied any knowledge of their arrests.

Fear of government reprisal, ideological prejudices, and limited information lead the media to avoid covering sensitive topics, such as human rights, military involvement in disappearances and other abuses, military corruption, and the military's controversial role in national politics.

At the same time, papers regularly attack human rights critics and other whistle-blowers, such as former army officer Habib Souaidia, whose highly publicized book *The Dirty War*, published in February, alleged that the Algerian army had executed suspected militants and committed other grave rights abuses.

In mid-February, the Arabic daily *Al-Youm* published an interview with Omar Chikhi, a former emir of the militant Armed Islamic Group (GIA). In the interview, Chikhi expressed no regret for killing journalists during the GIA's bloody campaign against the media between 1993 and 1996, and he agreed with Islamists' strategy of killing journalists and intellectuals.

The interview caused an uproar among local journalists, who were angered that Chikhi had benefited from the government's political amnesty of 1999. It was later revealed, however, that the interview with Chikhi had actually been conducted nearly two years earlier, leading some to suspect that the military had pressured the paper to publish the interview to deflect attention away from revelations in *The Dirty War*.

Security forces keep a close watch over the press, according to some Algerian journalists. During the year, agents monitored and questioned some journalists, while military security forces forged or maintained relationships with others in an attempt to influence their work.

Authorities also continued to restrict the work of foreign journalists, requiring them to be accompanied by bodyguards, supposedly for safety reasons. But many say that the government escorts are there to control rather than protect media workers. Foreign reporters often had difficulty in

obtaining visas to work in the country. Some foreign journalists allege they have been blacklisted in retaliation for their unfavorable coverage of the regime.

January 21

Al-Ahram al-Arabi

CENSORED

Algerian authorities banned the distribution of the January 13 edition of the Egyptian weekly magazine *Al-Ahram al-Arabi*. That week's issue contained an article reporting on alleged conflicts between President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and the influential Algerian military.

The issue also included an interview with the Moroccan foreign minister, who spoke of deteriorating relations between Algeria and Morocco.

June 14

Fadila Nejma, *Echourouk*

KILLED

Adel Zerrouk, *Al-Rai*

KILLED

Two Algerian journalists were killed while covering mass anti-government protests organized by Berber community leaders in the capital, Algiers.

Nejma, a reporter for the Arabic weekly *Echourouk*, died after being struck by a speeding bus during the protests. Nejma suffered severe chest and leg injuries and died later in the hospital.

Local journalists and press sources reported that the bus driver ran over Nejma while trying to escape demonstrators intent on torching his bus, or that one of the protesters had commandeered the vehicle and was trying to crash it into local security forces.

Also killed was Zerrouk, a reporter with the Arabic daily *Al-Rai*. Some CP sources and local press reports stated that Zerrouk died after a crowd of protesters trampled him. According to other reports, however, the journalist was hit by the same bus that killed Nejma.

July 11

Faouzia Ababsa, *L'Authentique*

LEGAL ACTION

Ababsa, managing editor of the French-language daily *L'Authentique*, was convicted in absentia of defaming Abdelkarim Mahmoudi, president of the Confederation of Finance Managers, a private trade association. The charge was based on a May 2000 article in which the journalist accused Mahmoud

of misusing the organization's funds.

Ababsa told CPJ that four months prior to the verdict, she had testified before a judge in connection with the defamation charges. But Ababsa only became aware of the trial on July 12, when she learned from an article in the newspaper *Echourouk* that she had received a suspended six-month prison sentence and a 1500 dinar (US\$20) fine.

Rather than appeal the verdict, Ababsa rejected it altogether and wrote to the Ministry of Justice demanding an official investigation of the trial.

On July 25, CPJ issued an alert about the case.