

Beat: News

Egypt sentences 3 Al Jazeera journalists to 7 years

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USPA News - Three Al Jazeera journalists were sentenced to seven years imprisonment on Monday after an Egypt court convicted them of assisting the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood by reporting `false news.` Several other journalists were convicted and sentenced in absentia. The three Al Jazeera journalists, Cairo bureau chief Mohamed Fahmy, correspondent Peter Greste, and producer Baher Mohamed, have been detained and imprisoned in Cairo since December 29 on charges that include conniving with the Muslim Brotherhood, distributing false news, and jeopardizing national security.

Though 20 journalists and opposition members were on trial, the core of the case focused on these three. The three imprisoned Al Jazeera journalists have denied the charges, as has their employer. The judge at the Cairo Criminal Court sentenced Greste and Fahmy to seven years in prison and Mohamed to 10 years, inciting outrage from journalists and activists around the world. Mohamed received an additional three years of imprisonment for being in possession of a bullet. Eleven other defendants were tried in absentia and received 10-year sentences, while four others were sentenced to 7 years and two more were acquitted. Al Jazeera English managing director Al Anstey rejected the verdicts, saying the three Al Jazeera journalists had done a "brilliant job" and that they and other journalists were convicted without evidence. "Guilty` of covering stories with great skill and integrity. `Guilty` of defending people`s right to know what is going on in their world," he said. "To have detained them for 177 days is an outrage. To have sentenced them defies logic, sense, and any semblance of justice," he added. Fahmy and Greste were arrested on the evening of December 29 at the Zamalek Marriott Hotel, where they were using two suites as a base of operation for their work after Al Jazeera had undergone repeated attacks, arrests and confiscation of equipment. Mohamed was arrested that same night at his home in Cairo. During the controversial trial, on multiple occasions, the prosecution showed video footage that was unrelated to Egypt and showed clips from networks other than Al Jazeera. They also played sound recordings that were inaudible and presented those as evidence against the defendants. "Previous court dates have bizarrely included the prosecution showing footage of Sky News Arabia tourism reports, BBC podcasts, songs by Gotye, photo-shopped images of Mohammed Fahmy, Peter Greste`s family photos, and some of Greste`s award-winning work from East Africa," Al Jazeera said in a statement after the June 16 trial. Additionally, three audio/visual witnesses for the prosecution were unable to recollect the footage presented to them by the investigators. They could not determine whether the footage constituted a crime, and one witness directly contradicted his written affidavit and claimed that the prosecutor had added additional footage after it was viewed by the witnesses. Philip Luther, of the London-based human rights group Amnesty International, called the verdict "a travesty of justice" and described the trial as a "complete sham." A trial observer from the organization said the prosecution had failed to produce "a single shred" of solid evidence to link the journalists to a terrorist organization or prove they had falsified news footage. Dutch journalist Rena Netjes, tried in absentia, was one of those who received a 10-year prison sentence after being convicted of assisting an organization outlawed by Egypt. Dutch foreign minister Frans Timmermans said Netjes did not get a fair trial, as her lawyers were not allowed to defend her during the trial because she was not in Egypt. Additionally, the judge never addressed her specific case during the trial, according to the ministry. "The Netherlands takes this matter seriously. I have summoned the Egyptian ambassador to the ministry and will today discuss the case in Luxembourg with my EU colleagues," said Timmermans. "The minimum requirements for a fair trial were not met," added Timmermans, who said the process was contrary to UN conventions. In London, British Foreign Secretary William Hague also said he was "appalled" by the verdicts against the journalists. "I am particularly concerned by unacceptable procedural shortcomings during the trial process, including that key prosecution evidence was not made available to the defense team. Freedom of the press is a cornerstone of a stable and prosperous society," he said. Hague said the British government had also summoned its Egyptian ambassador to discuss the case. "Diplomats will continue to urge the Egyptian Government to demonstrate its commitment to freedom of expression by reviewing this case as a matter of urgency," the foreign secretary added.

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