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Middle East & North Africa - Egypt

Threats

Disturbing moves against news media by Supreme Council

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Reporters Without Borders is worried by the last night's threat by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to use the state of emergency law against all journalists "threatening social peace." It followed a raid earlier in the day on *Al-Jazeera's* Egyptian affiliate, *Al-Jazeera Mubasher Egypt*, as part of an announced operation to check the licences of 16 satellite TV stations.

"We fear a security clampdown in Egypt, with the use of all the provisions of the state of emergency law to impose order and gag the media," Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Jean-François Julliard said. *"We urge the Supreme Council to reverse the decisions taken in the past few days and to ensure that media freedom becomes a reality six months after Hosni Mubarak's fall."*

The raid on *Al-Jazeera Mubasher Egypt's* Cairo headquarters was carried by culture ministry and public broadcasting agency personnel and members of the security services. After examining the station's official papers, they seized its mobile broadcasting equipment and arrested a technician, Ahmed Al-Banna, who was taken to the nearest district police station.

Officials reportedly cited the station's lack of a licence for the past four months as grounds for the raid. *Al-Jazeera Mubasher Egypt* supposedly submitted a request for a licence extension on 20 March without providing all the required documents.

The government news agency *MENA* said that, although local transmission of *Al-Jazeera Mubasher Egypt's* signal was cut, it continued to be freely available on Nilesat, like *Al-Jazeera* itself. *MENA* also claimed that local residents had filed complaints accusing the station of "sowing dissent" and "calling for demonstrations."

Al-Jazeera Mubasher Egypt is still broadcasting on the same satellite frequency, but from *Al-Jazeera* headquarters in Qatar instead of its studios in the Cairo neighbourhood of Al-Agouza.

The licence verification operation was launched 48 hours after the station covered an attack by protesters on the Israeli embassy in Cairo. The scenes of chaos showed by the station have prompted criticism of the government's handling of the incident, especially the passivity of the security forces. Many journalists were targeted by the crowd during the attack.

Mubarak's information minister, Anas el-Fekki, closed *Al-Jazeera's* Cairo bureau and rescinded the permits of all of its employees on 30 January, at the height of the uprising against the former regime. The next day, five journalists working for *Al-Jazeera English* (Egyptians and foreigners) were detained for an hour and a half and their cameras and recordings were seized. Until then, *Al-Jazeera* had been covering the revolution live around the clock.

In order to circumvent the censorship during the uprising, *Al-Jazeera* asked Egyptian bloggers to directly send it information about the situation on the ground and photos and video footage taken with mobile phones.

Yesterday's operation came just four days after a decision by the Supreme Council's information minister to temporarily freeze the granting of satellite TV licences to recent applicants without saying how long the freeze would last. He accused TV stations of "indiscipline" and said he was asking the relevant agency to "take legal measures against satellite TV stations that jeopardize stability and security."

In a separate development, judge Mustafa Hassan Abdullah yesterday ordered the media and public barred from the court that is trying former senior officials for ordering men on camels to charge protesters last February. Four days before that, another judge, Ahmed Refaat, banned journalists from covering the latest hearing in the Mubarak trial.
