

Monday, 29 June 2009

Press union and human rights group condemned verdict Moroccan newspapers fined for insulting Gaddafi



Ali Anouzla, director of al-Jarida al-Aoula vowed to continue writing

CAIRO (Al Arabiya)

A Casablanca court heavily fined three top Moroccan newspapers Monday for publishing critical articles on Libyan leader Moamer Gaddafi.

Freedom of the press landed the three local newspapers al-Jarida al-Aoula, al-ahdath al-Maghribia, and al-Massae in hot water after they published articles criticizing Kadhafi, prompting the Libyan leader to sue them for libel.

The court fined the dailies three million dirhams (\$374,129), an amount far less than the 90 million dirhams Kadhafi initially filed for when he accused the papers of "attacks on the dignity of a head of state."

During the trial an array of defense lawyers argued that the premise upon which Gaddafi's claims were based was out of keeping with the Libyan constitution, as he is nowhere referred to as head of state, but simply as "guide."

Five of nine staff members from the three dailies were each fined 120,200 dirhams (\$15,000).

Other journalists who came under fire were Ali Anouzla, director of al-Jarida al-Aoula, Mohamed Brini, director of al-Ahdath al-Maghribia and one of his journalists, Mokhtar Labzioui, and Rachid Nini, director of al-Massae and Youssef Meskine, a journalist from the same paper.

Verdict condemned

The National Union of the Moroccan Press staged a demonstration following the trial outside the Casablanca court as the Moroccan press union strongly condemned the court's verdict, warning that it

encouraged press censorship.

In its statement released immediately after the verdict, the union expressed its support for the three newspapers," and said heads of state must learn to take criticism from the press and allow for dialogue with the media instead of seeking using the law to quell freedom of press.

Anouzla, head of al-Jarida al-Aoula, blasted the court's ruling as "a political verdict handed down for the Libyan leader by a justice system that lacks independence."

He vowed to continue his critique of the Libyan regime and said he would appeal the verdict.

"We are going to lodge an appeal, but we will not be prevented from continuing to criticize the Libyan regime," Anouzla added.

The late King Hassan II of Morocco won a lawsuit against French paper Le Monde on charges of insulting the king.

(With AFP)