

Media watchdog slams Tunisia, Sarkozy on human rights

France-based press freedom group Reporters Without Borders fiercely criticized Friday Tunisia's treatment of a journalist and French President Nicolas Sarkozy's praise of the country's human rights record.

In a press statement released one day before World Press Freedom day, the group said it was 'outraged' by the treatment of imprisoned journalist Slim Boukhdir, who has gone on a hunger strike after coming down with scabies.

'Boukhdir is being held in conditions clearly designed to deprive him of his dignity, and this is unacceptable,' Reporters Without Borders said. 'It was this aspect of the Tunisian regime that French President Nicolas Sarkozy unfortunately chose to hide during his latest official visit earlier this week.'

During his visit, Sarkozy repeatedly praised Tunisia's progress in human rights, and compared it to the situation in France by saying, 'Things are not perfect in Tunisia. But they are not perfect in France either.'

Referring to Sarkozy's statements, Reporters Without Borders added: 'Congratulating (Tunisian) President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali for the progress Tunisia has made in human rights means closing one's eyes to all that Boukhdir and so many other prisoners of conscience have to endure.'

Ben Ali is included on the Reporters Without Borders list of the world's worst 'press freedom predators.'

The group said Boukhdir had come down with scabies because he was being held in a cell 'that is not fit for habitation' and has not been allowed to take a shower for the past six weeks. The group claimed that prison authorities were not giving him the medicine to treat the ailment.

Arrested in November, Boukhdir is serving a one-year sentence for 'insulting behaviour towards an official in the exercise of his duty,' 'violating decency' and 'refusing to produce identity papers.'

Boukhdir once worked for the pro-government daily Al-Chourouk, but his salary was frozen in November 2005 after he wrote articles critical of the government for the website of the pan-Arab satellite TV news station Al-Arabiya.

'This marked the beginning of a campaign of intimidation that culminated in his arrest,' Reporters Without Borders said.

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