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His Majesty Qaboos Bin Said al Said
Sultan of Oman

Paris, 25 March 2009

Your Majesty,

The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information and Reporters Without Borders are writing to you about the case of journalist Ali al-Zweidi. As you may know, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information monitors freedom of expression and opinion in the Arab media, while Reporters Without Borders is an international press freedom organisation that defends the right to inform and to be informed.

Al-Zweidi is the co-founder and a distinguished board member of the Omani Writers' Society. He has been working as a journalist in Oman since 1986 and serves as the administrator of one of the groups in an Internet forum called "Sablat Oman," which is known to be critical of several institutions in your Kingdom.

In August 2008, Al-Zweidi allowed an article in English criticizing the executive director of the Omani telecommunications company Omantel to be posted on that forum. After its translation into Arabic, the article drew attention due to the pointed nature of its comments.

After Muhammad Ben Ali al-Wehebi, the head of Omantel, filed a complaint against the forum, Al-Zweidi was arrested and held for questioning until end of August 2008. He was arrested again in mid-February 2009 and held for 11 days. He was then charged with violating Article 61 of the Omani Communications Law, which prohibits "using a system or a device or a means of communication to direct a message while knowing it is untrue or which causes harm to a person or service." The charge carries a maximum sentence of a year in prison.

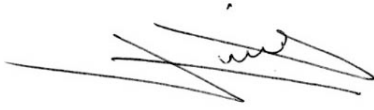
At a court hearing on 17 March, he was surprised to learn that he was also charged with leaking a secret document about plans by the Council of Ministers for a television program called "Hadha al-Sabah". The charge carries a maximum sentence of three years in prison. He is now awaiting the court's verdict on both charges. It is due to be issued on 21 April.

We urge you, Your Majesty, to halt this trial and to order Al-Zweidi's release on the grounds that his actions were limited to defence of free expression and to the realm of publishing.

We also urge you to call for "the immediate abolition of all unnecessary restrictions on the lives and activities" of the citizens of the Sultanate of Oman. Please do not let your Kingdom be included among those countries in the region that repress freedom of expression.

We thank you in advance for considering our request and we are at your disposal should you have any questions or desire to discuss this further.

Respectfully,



Jean-François Julliard,
Secretary General
Reporters Without Borders



Gamal Eid
Executive director
The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information