

## **UAE rules journalists not to be jailed over work**

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The prime minister of the United Arab Emirates decreed on Tuesday that journalists should not be jailed over their work, two days after two were jailed for libel, the state WAM news agency reported.

Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashed al-Maktoum "has issued instructions ... not to imprison journalists for reasons related to their work," said the head of the National Media Council, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahayan.

Sheikh Mohammad stated that "other measures can be taken to penalise a journalist who has committed a particular violation," added Sheikh Abdullah, who is also foreign minister.

Abdullah said the prime minister also called for speeding up the enactment of a new press law in line with amendments introduced by the National Media Council.

The amendments drop imprisonment as a penalty for press offences.

Sheikh Mohammad is also ruler of the booming emirate of Dubai, a member of the UAE that hosts scores of regional and international news organisations operating out of Internet and media free zones.

His move came two days after two Dubai-based journalists -- an Indian and an Egyptian working for the English-language daily Khaleej Times -- were sentenced to two months for libel, according to local press reports.

They have since been released on bail and are appealing.

Two UAE nationals were also recently sentenced to jail for defamation on an Internet site in the emirate of Ras al-Khaimah, another UAE member, and are appealing the rulings. The website has been closed.

Abdullah Omran, lawyer of one of the two, hailed Sheikh Mohammad's decision and said he hoped it would apply to Internet sites.

"We welcome this positive move, which proves that our wise leadership is responsive to the aspirations of its people. We hope it will extend to electronic sites, and that violators will be penalised by measures other than imprisonment since they are electronic journalists," Omran told AFP.

Omran is the lawyer for Mohammad Rashed al-Shehhi, owner of the website who has been jailed for a total of 17 months in two defamation cases involving local officials.

Fellow Emirati Khaled al-Asli was sentenced earlier in September to five months in jail on charges of writing an article on the site that slandered a local official.

Asli, who has denied writing the article posted under a pen name, has been released on bail while Shehhi is behind bars.