

Egyptian court convicts at least 16 American NGO workers of involvement in illegal activity in the country

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More than a dozen American aid workers have been sentenced to prison in Egypt after a court convicted them of stirring up unrest in the country.

At least 16 Americans were among the 43 NGO workers who were today found guilty of illegally using foreign funds and given jail sentences of up to five years.

Most of the Americans left Egypt last year, and are extremely unlikely to serve any prison time.

The convicted aid workers include Sam LaHood, son of the U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, who was sentenced in absentia to five years in prison.

The court in Cairo also issued judgements against the U.S. non-profit groups where the defendants worked, including the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute and Freedom House.

The organisations have had their Egyptian offices closed and their assets in the country seized.

27 of the 43 defendants received five-year jail terms, with the others being given sentences of one or two years.

The controversial case, which has angered U.S. officials and threatened American aid to Egypt, began early last year.

It had its origins in the period of military rule which followed the downfall of long-serving dictator Hosni Mubarak.

Egypt and the United States have been close allies for more than three decades, with the Egyptian military receiving more than \$1 billion in aid annually.

The aid is linked to a 1979 peace treaty with Israel, Washington's closest Middle East ally. Besides \$1.3 billion in U.S. military aid, Egypt also receives about \$250 million in economic aid every year.

Relations between the two countries have long been affected by Egypt's treatment of non-profit groups, which insist they are purely charitable and do not have political aims.

Last week, Human Rights Watch and 40 Egyptian rights groups claimed a law regulating non-governmental organisations would restrict the funding and operation of independent groups.

The contentious bill, proposed by Islamist President Mohammed Morsi, would allow the state to control nonprofits' activities as well as their domestic and international funding, according to HRW.

In a joint statement, the 40 rights groups accused Mr Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm of seeking to curb the freedom of NGOs through legal restrictions.

They said the proposed law could give Egypt's security apparatus the power to suppress rights group, drawing parallels to Mubarak's three decades of repression.

They also expressed fears foreign non-profits would be treated with hostility and that vaguely worded legislation would hinder their operations.