**Pens Against Biceps**
“While I was covering the latest election news in Shubra and after a round in some neighbouring constituencies where I took photographs about electoral fraud, four men came to stop me”, reports Asmaa Heriz, a 24 year old journalist with Al-Karama (dignity) weekly magazine. This day will forever remain engraved in her memory. “One of them put his hand on my mouth to stop me from screaming or calling for help while the others forced me into a car and drove off towards an unknown destination”, continues Heriz, who stills bears some scars from this attack. It was a tough experience for this journalist who finds it hard to relate the details of the event. She pauses for a moment and lets out a sigh before pursuing in a firm tone that reflects her audacity and determination. “I found myself in a dark office where a man began to interrogate me. He took my camera and started looking at the pictures. The expression on his face was that of pure anger, suddenly he grabbed my bag with a brisk movement and confiscated all of my papers, my CDs and even my mobile. When I dared to ask him where I was and why I was being treated this way, I was instantly showered with blows and insults”, she goes on. But Heriz does not give in and defends herself by returning the blows. Totally enraged, the man, who happens to be an official of State Security, draws out a piece of paper from his office and asks her to sign it. “It was, of course, a false declaration and when I refused to sign it, I was led through a dark corridor where two big women awaited to administer me a good thrashing. They were true professionals who knew how to hit really hard without dealing fatal blows or leaving any tell-tale marks on the body”, she explains. Heriz, ex-karate champion, tried to resist the assault but eventually lost consciousness. Upon opening her eyes again, she finds that same security official in front of her, notifying her that he hopes this thrashing will have taught her a good lesson and that he will never see her name in any newspapers again. He even advised her to get married and stay at home.

**A year of turbulence**
The experience suffered by this young journalist at the onset of her journey through the written press is only a part of the dark image of events that took place during the year 2005. In fact, Article 6 of law 96 of the year 1996 stipulates that all journalists are independent and must only, while practicing their profession, comply with the law. Moreover, Article 7 of the same law confirms that any accurate criticism or piece of information published by a journalist must not jeopardize his security and that he is under no obligation of disclosing his sources of information so long as he abides by the law.

However, according to the figures of the Journalists’ Syndicate, 50 journalists have been victims of violence throughout the year 2005. The year 2005 can therefore be considered as one of the worst years for freedom of expression in Egypt. “Reports from international organisations working in the field of freedom of expression confirm this fact. Suffice it to mention, for instance, that the Organisation of Journalists without frontiers registered a decline of 11 points in the freedom of expression and a rise in violence against journalists in comparison with previous years”, explains Yehia Qallash, a member of the Journalists’ Syndicate.

In fact, Egyptian streets have witnessed a heated period this year: demonstrations, disputes, presidential and parliamentary elections. In brief, events that incited a lot of writing. “The problem is that there is no distinction between members of the political game and journalists who must be present during the events simply because this is part of their job”, adds Qallash. The police who are supposed to protect journalists while they practice their job end up becoming a tool of oppression. “Certain journalists sometimes take advantage of every infraction to distort Egypt’s image abroad. This is a threat to the sovereignty of our country. Our mission is to safeguard its stability. It is not an easy task as we have 70 million individuals to deal with and it is only normal that certain violations should take place”, says an official from the interior ministry.

**A hot file**
This really pushed the Journalists’ Syndicate to start a case in protest against the violence to which journalists have fallen victim especially since two members of the syndicate council, Mohammed Abdel-Qouddous and Gamal Fahmi, have suffered the consequences. Nine complaints were submitted to the General Prosecutor following the parliamentary elections and another 11 after the events of the 25th of May 2005, during which the Egyptian streets witnessed demonstrations in protest against Article 76 of the Constitution. Furthermore, the syndicate appealed to the journalists who suffered this violence in the field to gather all available information and take the necessary measures. In fact, the Egyptian organisation for human rights has itself prepared a case regarding the violence that took place during the year 2005. The list has currently been stretched by another 5 cases of which that of Nawal Ali, who works for an independent newspaper. Nawal was supposed to follow a training course in the syndicate ground and on her way there was approached by baltaguis (bad guys) from the National party. They beat her and tore off her clothes while she was not even part of the gathering of journalists opposing Article 76 that day.
According to a journalist who prefers to remain anonymous, if the year 2004 bore witness to the kidnapping of certain journalists, like Reda Hilal and Abdul-Halim Qandil, the year 2005 was characterized by sexual harassment meant to terrorise women. Two journalists, Chaïmaa Abul-Kheir and Abir Al-Askari, from the independent newspaper Al-Dustur (the Constitution), who were covering the demonstrations of the Kefaya movement know a thing or two about this. Chaïmaa assures that the officer who grabbed her by the hair ordered two staff women to beat her up and tear off her clothes. “They even tried to remove my trousers but they did not manage to do it”, confides Chaïmaa Abul-Kheir. Meanwhile, her colleague Abir Al-Askari was sexually harassed by a group of youngsters who slipped their hands all over her body. “We ran to take refuge within the syndicate ground as we were nearby in Ramses street. When I got there, I fell and lost consciousness. And when I opened my eyes again, my colleagues helped me to escape” relates Abul-Kheir who registered this testimony with the Egyptian organisation for human rights in order that the necessary legal measures be taken against this sort of physical assault.

During the last month of the year gone by, the Journalists’ Syndicate has organised a day of solidarity with the journalists who were victims of violence. And in order to be more practical in such an electric atmosphere where access to a piece of information happens to be a risky business, other measures have been taken. “A journalist has to be as strong as a cow-boy to resist such violence” declares Amr, another 40 year old journalist who was also a victim.

For all the above reasons, the Journalists’ Syndicate, in association with international organisations, is currently putting in place a training course which aims to offer journalists who often find themselves in risky situations the means to ensure their security, protect their gear and escape from threatening sources in case of danger.