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Uganda: East Africa and Horn of Africa governments must put an end to targeting of human rights defenders

As the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights prepares to meet next month, Amnesty International and human rights defenders from across East Africa and the Horn of Africa expressed fears that progress made during the last two years could be lost in political negotiations. They today opened a conference to address this concern in the run-up to the African Commission's gathering, which begins on 21 November in Banjul.

Over 60 grassroots activists from Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Somaliland, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda will be participating in the conference, which is taking place in Entebbe, Uganda from 31 October to 04 November 2005. The talks have been organized by Amnesty International and the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders' Project (EHAHRDP).

The African Commission's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Mrs Jainaba Johm, will deliver the conference's keynote speech on the protection of human rights defenders in Africa. The conference will be followed by a press briefing on 4 November 2005, with the publication of a Final Declaration directed at government leaders.

"Human rights defenders across Africa continue to be subjected to a wide range of human rights violations -- including harassment, intimidation, banning or restriction of their activities, unlawful arrest, incommunicado detention, imprisonment on bogus charges, torture, ill-treatment and extra-judicial killings -- while exercising their right to defend the human rights of others," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

"We are asking the African Commission to reflect these regrettable facts in their negotiations and take all necessary steps to improve the protection of human rights defenders across the continent."

Amnesty International and the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project are deeply concerned at what they see to be a widespread wave of human rights violations against activists legitimately investigating human rights violations committed by government authorities and elements of armed groups.

Recent examples include:

In Ethiopia, between 8 and 14 June 2005, three investigators and three regional managers of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) were arrested in Addis Ababa and Dessie. The three investigators were conducting research on the military shootings of at least 36 people in Addis Ababa on 8 June, during street protests against alleged election fraud in the May 2005 elections. Cherinet Tadesse, Yared Hailemariam and Berhanu Tsegu were held incommunicado for about a month, accused of incitement to violence and organizing opposition demonstrations. All six activists were released on bail but have not been formally charged.

On 10 August 2005, twenty-three activists participating in a demonstration against the irregular allocation of public land in Kitale Town, western Kenya were arrested and detained in police custody for two days -- charged with "malicious damage of property by a rioting assembly group and taking part in unlawful assembly". On 12 August, Gabriel Dolan -- a human rights defender, Roman Catholic priest and coordinator of the Justice and Peace Commission -- went to the police station to visit those arrested during the protest. He was promptly arrested, charged with "incitement to violence, malicious damage of property by a rioting assembly group and taking part in unlawful assembly". He has since been released on bail, but his case is still pending.

In Somalia, the human rights community was shocked to learn about the murder of well-known peace activist Abdulkadir Yahya Ali in Mogadishu on 10 July 2005. Abdulkadir Yahya Ali, then director of the Centre for Research and Dialogue, was assassinated in his home by unidentified armed men.

Sudanese human rights defenders, including members of development and women's rights NGOs, lawyers, and journalists, often experience arbitrary detention, short-term arrest, lengthy interrogation, and harassment by government security services. Criticism or reporting on human rights violations -- especially in the context of the humanitarian and human rights crisis in Darfur -- is vigorously suppressed.

The director of the West Darfur office of the Sudan Social Development Organization (SUDO) was detained without charge or trial for seven months in 2004-5, and Sudan's best-known human rights defender and chair of SUDO, Dr Mudawi Ibrahim Adam, was briefly detained on 8 May 2005 to prevent him from travelling to Ireland to receive an international human rights defenders award.

Human rights abuses have also been committed by armed opposition groups in Darfur. Three SUDO staff members were kidnapped in North Darfur by rebel fighters on 29 September 2005 but released a few days later.

"We are urging governments in East Africa and the Horn to ensure that the principles contained in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders -- adopted in 1998 -- are fully respected and incorporated into national laws and mechanisms," said Hassan Shire Sheik, Coordinator of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project. "The defenders of the rights of African people deserve no less than the full protection of their governments and the international community."

Background

Amnesty International has documented and campaigned on cases of violations against African human rights defenders over several decades. Human rights defenders include all those who act collectively or independently to peacefully promote and protect universal human rights -- be they civil and political rights or economic, social and cultural rights -- based on international human rights treaties and standards. However, their work is often hampered by abuses by government agencies and, in some instances, armed groups and non-state actors.

Human rights defenders are active in all countries of East Africa and the Horn, except for Eritrea, where human rights organizations are not allowed to operate independently and freely. In Kenya and Uganda in particular, they have been for years at the forefront of civil society activism.

Press conference details:

When: 11 am (local time), Friday, 4 November 2005
Where: Windsor Lake Victoria Hotel, Entebbe, Uganda
Who: Jean Lokenga, Amnesty International; Hassan Shire Sheikh, Co-ordinator -- East and Horn of Africa HRD Project; Musa Gassama, International Service for Human Rights

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