

PUBLIC

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UA 254/99 Unfair trial / Prisoners of conscience 28 September 1999

DJIBOUTI Moussa Ahmed Idriss, journalist, opposition leader and
 member of parliament
 Ali Meidal Wais, journalist
 Daher Ahmed Farah, journalist, opposition leader

Amnesty International is very concerned by a recent government crackdown on the last two remaining opposition newspapers circulating in Djibouti. The three journalists named above were arrested and charged with *diffusion de fausses nouvelles*, "spreading false news", likely to "demoralize the army".

Moussa Ahmed Idriss, 66, co-director of *Le Temps*, The Times, was arrested on 23 September 1999 in Djibouti city. A large contingent of armed police arrested him in the middle of the night. Their arrival led to clashes at his home in which police fired grenades, shot at people (one of whom died of bullet wounds), beat several others (including Moussa Ahmed Idriss' wife) and arrested 24 relatives and supporters - they are still held on criminal charges.

Le Temps is published by the opposition party *Opposition djiboutienne unifiée* (ODU), Unified Djiboutian Opposition. Moussa Ahmed Idris is a member of parliament and president of the ODU party. In April 1999, he was the unsuccessful opposition candidate in the presidential elections. (Before independence he had been a member of the French National Assembly.) Before his arrest, his parliamentary immunity was lifted by the president of the assembly in a dubious procedure. He is expected to be tried imminently. Amnesty International is concerned that he will not receive a fair trial.

Retired army general Ali Meidal Wais is the other co-director of *Le Temps*. Daher Ahmed Farah is president of the opposition *Parti du renouveau démocratique* (PRD), Party of Democratic Renewal and editor of *Le Renouveau*, The Renewal, the journal of the PRD. Both men were found guilty after a summary trial on 2 September and sentenced to eight months and one year in prison respectively and each fined 1 million Djibouti francs (US\$5,850).

The arrests were over articles which appeared in *Le Temps* and *Le Renouveau* about an explosion which destroyed an army helicopter. The articles reported a claim by the opposition *Front pour la restauration de l'unité et de la démocratie* (FRUD), Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy, that its forces shot down the helicopter, but they also reported the government denial of any FRUD connection to the incident. The FRUD communique from Paris was also reported by French international radio stations.

Amnesty International believes that the three journalists have been imprisoned contrary to international standards for the freedom of the press and are prisoners of conscience. The organization also believes that the two already convicted did not receive fair trials - they were prevented from having legal representation of their choice and were undefended, members of the public were barred from attending the trial and there appeared to be several procedural irregularities.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Djibouti is currently governed by President Ismael Omar Guelleh, the former head of security who succeeded President Hassan Gouled Aptidon, his uncle, in the May 1999 elections. The ruling *Rassemblement populaire pour le progrès* (RPP), People's Rally for Progress, and an allied party won all the seats in the first multi-party elections in 1997. Two deputies, including Moussa Ahmed Idriss, later went into opposition. Some opposition leaders were barred from standing in the 1997 and 1999 elections after court convictions in an earlier political trial.

The FRUD, which draws its support largely from the Afar ethnic group, has been fighting government forces since 1991, alleging government repression and exclusion of Afars. Peace talks failed in 1994, though a small FRUD faction joined the government.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in French or your own language:

- expressing concern at the arrests of Moussa Ahmed Idriss, Daher Ahmed Farah and Ali Meidal Wais for exercising their right to freedom of expression;
- stating that their imprisonment violates international standards on the freedom of the press;
- expressing concern that Ali Meidal Wais and Daher Ahmed Farah did not receive a fair trial, particularly as they were prevented from having legal representation, and that Moussa Ahmed Idriss is also likely to be unfairly tried;
- appealing for their immediate and unconditional release as prisoners of conscience.

President

Son Excellence Monsieur Ismael Omar Guelleh
Président de la République
La Présidence
BP 6

Djibouti, République de Djibouti

Telegrams: Président, Djibouti

Faxes: + 253 350174

Salutation: Monsieur le Président de la République / Dear President

Minister of Justice

Monsieur Mohamed Dini Farah
Ministre de la Justice
Ministère de la Justice
BP 12

Djibouti, République de Djibouti

Telegrams: Ministre Justice, Djibouti

Faxes: + 253 355420

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Prime Minister

Monsieur Barkat Gourad Hamadou
Premier Ministre
BP 2086

Djibouti, République de Djibouti

Faxes: + 253 351208

Minister of Foreign Affairs
Monsieur Mohamed Moussa Chehem
Ministre des affaires étrangères
Ministère des affaires étrangères
BP 1863
Djibouti, République de Djibouti
Faxes: + 253 353840

and to diplomatic representatives of DJIBOUTI accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 9 November 1999.