

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Somalia: Civilians must not be a casualty of the conflict in Somalia**

Amnesty International today wrote to the US government expressing deep concern about reports that at least 30 civilians have been killed in recent US air attacks in southern Somalia.

Amnesty International wrote to US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates urgently requesting information about the airstrikes and an explanation of what measures were taken by US forces to avoid civilian casualties during the attacks.

"We are concerned that civilians may have been killed as a result of a failure to comply with international humanitarian law," said Claudio Cordone, Senior Director of Amnesty International's Research Programme. "What we want to know from the US government is whether their forces took the necessary precautions to distinguish between civilians and combatants when they chose the means and methods of their attack."

International humanitarian law prohibits direct attacks on civilians or civilian objects; attacks that do not distinguish between military targets and civilians or civilian objects (indiscriminate attacks); and attacks that, although aimed at a military target, have a disproportionate impact on civilians or civilian objects (disproportionate attacks.)

US authorities have not released detailed information on the airstrikes in Somalia. According to a Pentagon spokesperson, a US Air Force AC-130 gunship was used in an airstrike on 7 January to target the "principal al-Qa'ida leadership" operating in the southern part of Somalia.

Reports suggest that the attack on Hayo village near Afmadow town targeted three named al-Qa'ida operatives suspected of involvement in bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. It is unclear whether the three men were killed in this attack. They were said to be located with fighters of the Union of Islamic Courts, defeated in Mogadishu by Ethiopian forces backing the Transitional Federal Government in fighting in late December.

Amnesty International also wrote to Kenyan authorities, urging them to re-open their border -- closed since 2 January -- to refugees fleeing from the conflict.

Tens of thousands of people have been internally displaced by the ongoing conflict in the south of Somalia, which is still badly affected by the late 2006 flood-related humanitarian crisis.

The Kenyan government said that it was closing the border to prevent fighters of the Union of Islamic

Courts from entering Kenya pretending to be refugees.

"The Kenyan government must distinguish between fighters and civilians and abide by its obligations to genuine asylum-seekers under international law," said Claudio Cordone.

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