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Somalia/Somaliland: Human Rights Defenders issue Declaration

As the four-month-long Somali Peace and Reconciliation Conference resumes at a new Kenyan venue and with a new chairperson, Somali human rights activists have issued an important declaration founded on their many years of mostly unacknowledged and risk-fraught human rights defence work.

Somali human rights defenders from 23 organizations, meeting in Hargeisa from 10 to 18 February 2002, declared that they will "*increase the struggle against human rights abuses, such as arbitrary killings, torture, arbitrary detention and kidnapping, and work for the equal rights of all, with full protection for vulnerable groups such as women and minorities*". They affirmed support for women human rights defenders campaigning for the eradication of violence against women and for women's full political participation in building democratic governance.

In addition, they called on all Somali political authorities to "*publicly recognize the legitimate role of human rights defenders in the protection and promotion of human rights, as set out in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders*", and that "*human rights defenders will not be subject to reprisals for these activities*".

They also called on the international community to protect human rights defenders at risk, and assist them to build up the capacities of their organizations. The declaration was adopted in the presence of the UN Independent Expert for Somalia, Dr. Ghanim Alnajjar.

Human rights defenders in conflict-riven central and southern Somalia face daily dangers of arbitrary killing or detention by faction militias or ransom kidnapping by gunmen whom faction leaders have done little or nothing to suppress in the areas they claim to control. In Puntland, civil society organizations documenting abuses receive little tolerance from the political authorities and are at risk as a result of the unresolved armed conflict. In Somaliland in contrast, where there is a long-established peace, general respect for human rights, a largely free press and a multi-party election process, activists are concerned mainly about a very poor justice system and declining political representation for women and minorities.

In November 2002, Amnesty International's Open Letter to the Somalia Peace Conference supported the demands of civil society groups attending it for greater priority for human rights and not just a sharing-out of violently-acquired power and its gains between armed faction leaders. The Somali Human Rights Defenders Declaration took up the concerns of other Somali activists at the peace talks and reiterated that there should be "*no impunity granted to those who have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity ... if they were allowed to hold government office they could commit such crimes again*".

"The outcome of the peace talks should not be a government of warring faction-leaders giving themselves total impunity for their gross violations of human rights", said Amnesty International. "Somali political leaders who believe in peace and human rights must unite now to stop the cease-fire violations, arbitrary killings, rape, kidnapping and financial extortion." So far there is little indication from the armed faction leaders that they are committed to rescue Somalia from a seemingly endless crisis threatening regional peace and security.

"The regional and international sponsors of the peace talks must strive harder to secure this commitment and see it in action as a basic pre-requisite for any new transitional government," they said

Background

Meeting in Somaliland at a workshop organised by Amnesty International, Novib and International Cooperation for Development in the only safe area of the former state of Somalia which disintegrated in 1991, the participants included human rights defenders from Mogadishu, such as the Peace and Human Rights Network, Coalition of Grassroots Womens' Organizations and Dr Ismail Jumale Human Rights Organization; Dulmidiid Centre for Human Rights from Puntland regional state; Isha Human Rights Organization from Baidoa; Kisima Peace and Human Rights Organization from Kismayu; and Nagaad Women's Coalition, Hornwatch and several others from Somaliland.

Somaliland's 12-year government is still campaigning for international recognition. The UN-supported Transitional National Government (TNG) holds little power even in Mogadishu as it approaches the end of its three-year term. Two rival coalitions of over a dozen armed clan-based factions - one linked to the TNG and the other backed by Ethiopia - continue to struggle for power. Violations of the October 2002 cease-fire persist unpunished.

The full text of the Declaration, and a link to the Somali-language text is available on our website.

For the full text of Amnesty International's Open Letter to the Somali Peace Talks

see:<http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/Index/AFR520022002?OpenDocument&of=COUNTRIES%2FSOMALIA>

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