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East Africa and the Horn of Africa: Human rights defenders form network of support for colleagues at risk

Human rights defenders from East Africa and the Horn of Africa have often put their lives or liberty at grave risk in their efforts to expose human rights violations. In October 2005 they came together for the first time at a conference in Uganda, and formed a Human Rights Defenders Network to support each other. Today, a 34-page report of the human rights defenders' first conference will be released.

In recent years, human rights defenders in this sub-region have been harassed, defamed, dismissed from their jobs, physically attacked, arbitrarily detained, subjected to fabricated charges and unfair trials, tortured or ill-treated, and sometimes 'disappeared' or killed.

In Ethiopia, human rights defenders are on trial for treason or seeking to overthrow the constitution, and face possible death sentences; in Sudan, human rights activists have been harassed, detained and interrogated. In Somalia, where there is no effective government or rule of law, human rights organisations are under constant threat of violence from warlords and militias. In Eritrea, there is no human rights organisation, on account of widespread political repression.

Despite protection afforded by international and regional human rights treaties and standards, such as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998), governments (and some armed political groups) continue to take repressive action against human rights defenders for exposing human rights violations.

This troubled sub-region of Africa has experienced massive human rights violations going back many years, in the context of single-party rule, military dictatorship, armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies, and in the extreme case of Somalia, the long-term collapse of the state. Women human rights defenders have often suffered from social exclusion. Those advocating for sexual rights have encountered harassment and violence from the general public, as well as the threat of criminal prosecution on account of their sexual orientation.

Yet human rights defenders' organizations in the sub-region have achieved considerable success in establishing their right, in partnership with the international human rights community, to investigate report and advocate for the whole range of human rights -- civil, political, economic, social and cultural -- including women's rights. They have obtained redress for victims and survivors of human rights violations of all kinds, and contributed to long-term protection of human rights. Their work has been recognized by regional inter-governmental organizations. Notably, the Kigali Declaration, adopted at the first AU ministerial conference on human rights in Africa in May 2003, recognised "the important role that the human rights defenders play in the promotion and protection of human rights in Africa". The African Commission on

Human and Peoples' Rights has mandated a Special Rapporteur to act upon information of human rights defenders at risk. What African human rights defenders need now is more support from the African Union; from governments and other institutions in Africa; and from the international community.

The conference was jointly organized by Amnesty International and the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defender Project (EHAHRDP), a regional non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Kampala. It brought together 43 human rights defenders, including 19 women defenders, from Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Somaliland, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. It provided a unique opportunity for human rights defenders from East Africa and the Horn of Africa to share their experiences, exchange ideas and build collaboration to support each other.

The report contains testimonies by human rights defenders of arbitrary arrest in Ethiopia, kidnapping and death threats in Somalia, forced female genital mutilation in Kenya, and persecution of a sexual rights activist in Uganda. Updated situation reports on each country are included.

The report describes workshop discussions about the problems human defenders face in situations of armed conflict, political and legal repression. Presentations are summarized on international and regional instruments for the protection of human rights defenders; risk assessment and security management; mainstreaming gender and engendering human rights defenders; trauma counselling and coping strategies; and lobbying, media work, strategic planning and advocacy.

The conference concluded with an Action Plan, with strategies to enhance the capacity, legal and political protection, and psycho-social support for human rights defenders.

Quotes from testimonies in the report

"While I have been here in Uganda at this conference, the same demonstrations and killings have occurred again in Addis Ababa. At least 36 people have been killed in the streets. Ethiopia's Federal Police have released the list of names and photographs of 55 'most wanted' individuals who it accuses of coordinating, leading and participating in subversive activities targeted at dismantling the constitutional system through the use of force. My name and photo are on the list. That was the day I learnt that I would not be able to return home." (Ethiopia)

"As a woman human rights defender, you have more challenges. The cultural cohesion is still very tight, and so working in a society that is highly male dominated and patriarchal presents a number of problems and often setbacks for women human rights defenders." (Sudan)

"Most importantly, we have broken the silence and veil on FGM. The misconception of its being a sacred issue is slowly fading and receding to the past. We pray one day FGM will be abandoned." (Kenyan human rights defender)

"During my service as a human rights defender, the challenges I faced have given me the spirit to keep up the morale to continue with my struggles till death with hope that some day I shall see the Somali people enjoying their basic human rights." (Somalia)

For a full copy of the report *East Africa and the Horn of Africa - Defending the Defenders: A Human Rights Defenders Conference* in English, please see <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf040012006>. The report will be available in Arabic, Somali, Amharic and Tigrinya at a later date.

