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PUBLIC STATEMENT

Djibouti: Human rights defender prevented from attending an Amnesty International meeting

Amnesty International is concerned that Djibouti's most prominent human rights defender, Aref Mohamed Aref, has been refused the return of his passport, which prevents him from attending an Amnesty International meeting in Dakar, Senegal, starting on 28 June.

Aref Mohamed Aref, a lawyer, was released early from a six-month prison sentence in May 1999 by the new Djibouti President, Ismail Omar Guelleh. A well-known non-violent critic of the government who had defended political prisoners, Aref Mohamed Aref had been imprisoned in February, shortly before the presidential election, on a criminal charge in connection with a business matter in 1994.

Amnesty International believes the trial to have been politically motivated and unfair -- he was denied the defence counsel of his choice, there were numerous irregularities with the process, and his appeal was thrown out by the Supreme Court in a brief session with no advance notice or consultation with his legal representative. The Supreme Court also banned him from legal practice for five years, a judgement which he is challenging in court.

Last week, Amnesty International appealed to Djibouti President Ismael Omar Guelleh to return Aref Mohamed Aref's passport, which had been seized in December 1998 as he was about to depart for Paris to attend the World Human Rights Defenders Summit. This summit conference was

organized by Amnesty International and other human rights organization on the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Next week's meeting in Dakar, hosted by Amnesty International's Senegalese Section, will bring together human rights defenders from all over Africa as a follow-up to the human rights defenders meetings organized by Amnesty International in Africa in 1997 and 1998 to support and protect human rights defenders in the continent.

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