

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: AFR 52/002/2008
Date: 31 January 2008

Somalia: Humanitarian workers killed by road-side bomb

Amnesty International today condemned the killings on 28 January in southern Somalia of three humanitarian staff members of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and a passing journalist.

Victor Okumu, 51, a surgeon, Kenyan citizen and long-serving MSF staff member, Damien Lehalle, 27, a logistics officer and French citizen, and Mohamed Bidhaan, their Somali driver, were killed near Kismayu hospital in the port city of Kismayu when a road-side bomb was detonated, apparently targeting their MSF-marked vehicle. No-one has so far claimed responsibility for the blast. Details of the incident are not yet clear and the reason for it is not yet known.

Journalist Hassan Kafi Hared, 36, an official of the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ), who contributed to the official Somali National News Agency (SONNA) and *gedonet* website, was killed in the blast when he happened to be walking past. Four other people were injured.

MSF is the leading medical humanitarian organization working in Somalia, with 800 national and 60 international staff. It has now withdrawn its remaining international staff from Kismayu. The city's only hospital, which MSF re-opened only a few months ago with a new surgical unit, is now closed. Very few international humanitarian agencies have international staff resident in Somalia on account of the high security risks in most areas, relying instead on Somali staff who are also often at high risk of attacks.

Kismayu in recent months has been spared the bloody conflict 500 kilometres away in Mogadishu between insurgents and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) supported by the Ethiopian military. NGOs and humanitarian workers in Kismayu have, however, been at some risk from opposed clan-based factions and some have been killed in the past.

Amnesty International joins the UN Secretary General, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia, the UN Independent Expert for Somalia and international and Somali NGOs in expressing its deep sympathies to the families of the victims of this heinous crime. It expresses solidarity with civil society groups in Kismayu who led a large demonstration against the killings.

Amnesty International calls on the TFG and the local authorities in Kismayu to investigate these killings of humanitarian workers and to bring the perpetrators to justice in accordance with international standards of fair trial. It urges them to take steps to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers and the protection of humanitarian operations.

In the current humanitarian emergency in Somalia and amid massive violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, humanitarian workers, human rights defenders and journalists have been particular targets of all parties to the conflict.