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Somaliland: Opposition party leaders jailed after unfair trial, defence lawyers fined and banned from practising

On 19 August three opposition party leaders were sentenced to three years and nine months' imprisonment and banned from political activities for five years.

Mohamed Abdi "Gabose", 55, Somaliland's only neurologist and a former government minister; Mohamed Hashi Elmi, 69, a civil engineer and former Mayor of Hargeisa; and Jamal Aideed Ibrahim, 51, a telecommunications businessperson, were arrested on 28 July in Hargeisa, the Somaliland capital. They were refused bail and detained in Mandera prison, 95 kilometres north-east of Hargeisa, where conditions are poor. Their families have only occasionally been allowed to visit them.

The three men are leaders of the new and unregistered *Qaran* party ("The Nation"), which planned to contest elections due to be held in December 2007.

They were tried in a temporary court at Mandera police training college. They refused to participate in the trial in the absence of their defence lawyers, who also refused to participate. Their lawyers had earlier submitted that they could not appear in the court because the Mandera regional court had no jurisdiction in the case. The court did not respond to their submission.

The three defence lawyers, Mohamed Saeed Hirsi, Abdulrahman Ibrahim Alin and Ibrahim Iidle Saleban, were fined 5 million shillings (approximately US\$ 1,000 equivalent) for contempt of court and banned from practising law for a year.

The three *Qaran* leaders were charged with seditious assembly, on the grounds that they had held illegal public political meetings. They did not reply to the charges and were convicted. No evidence was presented that any violence had occurred or been advocated.

Amnesty International considers that the three did not obtain a fair trial. The organization renews its call to Somaliland President Dahir Riyaale Kahin for their immediate and unconditional release as prisoners of conscience, and for the full restoration of their political rights.

Amnesty International calls also for the lifting of the fine against the three defence lawyers and their professional suspension, which it regards as having been imposed unfairly.

Background

The Somaliland constitution allows the formation of political parties and freedom of assembly, although in the last elections in 2002, only three parties were allowed to participate.

The Republic of Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991, but has not so far gained international recognition. It is the only part of the former Somali Republic to have established security and a functioning government with a multi-party election system.

For further information on the case, please see *Somaliland: Leaders of new opposition party arrested at*: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf520132007>
