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**Message from Amnesty International to the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ)
General Assembly, Baidoa, Somalia, 20-21 July 2006**

Dear friends,

Amnesty International sends warm greetings to the first General Assembly of the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ).

We welcome this meeting whose theme is “the rights and responsibilities of journalists”. Freedom of the media is a fundamental part of universal human rights. Freedom of expression is essential for the enjoyment of all human rights and its respect reflects a country’s standards of justice and good governance. In any country, protecting the right of media workers to express and publish information and opinions is an important defence against arbitrary rule and impunity for human rights violations.

Journalists are important human rights defenders. By publishing materials about human rights, they spread awareness of human rights standards which governments are expected to respect. They also inform the public about human rights violations which governments are expected to stop and prevent. It is particularly useful for journalists in Somalia to report on violations of press freedom; risks to human rights defenders and civil society activists; the rights of women - especially violence against women, including FGM; the rights of minorities; displaced persons and refugees; children's rights (i.e. up to age 18); the right to fair trial according to international standards; treatment of prisoners; the personal security of civilians, political killings and kidnapping; dealing with abuses of the past and the question of impunity; the death penalty and other cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments; and safeguards for humanitarian activities and workers. Positive news on human rights in Somalia and other countries also needs to be reported.

Yet journalists in Somalia, as NUSOJ has reported, have been subjected in the past year to arbitrary arrests by the authorities, death threats, unfair trials, physical violence and ill-treatment, and other forms of harassment. NUSOJ even had its Mogadishu headquarters office occupied by militia in recent days. NUSOJ is to be commended for establishing, with the involvement of its members, information-collecting and reporting mechanisms. In addition, it has trained “Press Freedom Protectors” to collect information on abuses against journalists and it has brought the abuses to the urgent attention of the appropriate authorities for swift remedy. This process, supported by international media freedom organizations, has undoubtedly been successful on several occasions. The authorities in many cases listened to the complaints and were open to discussing them, investigated the reported abuses and reportedly took action to remedy them.

A new Network of Human Rights Defenders has been formed in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. Together with a project coordinated by a co-founder of the Dr Ismail Jumaale Human Rights Organization, Amnesty International brought together 43 human rights defenders from Somalia and all other countries in this region, including a representative of NUSOJ, to a conference in Uganda last October. Defenders from the region, whatever the political environment in which they work, committed themselves to support each other impartially and vigorously in the struggle for human rights, which is universal and goes beyond any particular political situation.

Somalia's political environment and security are still fragile. Amnesty International expresses its concern and condolences at the loss of life of over 100 men, women and children, and injuries to hundreds more civilians, in the recent armed conflict in Mogadishu. Amnesty International calls upon both the Transitional Federal Government and the Union of Islamic Courts to do all they can to provide basic security and freedoms for all citizens and to publicly guarantee the protection of basic human rights, including the freedom of the media.

The theme of your conference, "rights and responsibilities of journalists", will lead to much discussion, including on the complex balance between protecting press freedoms and protecting national security and the reputations of officials. The incommunicado detention of numerous journalists without charge or trial, unfair trials and closure of newspapers in other countries in the Horn, such as Ethiopia and Eritrea, reflect the general repression of human rights and human rights defenders in those countries and the unjustifiable restrictions on the right to freedom of expression. Amnesty International maintains that people should not be imprisoned for the legitimate and non-violent expression of opinion.

I conclude by sending my best wishes for your General Assembly and our support for your work for media freedom and human rights.

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