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Djibouti: Jailed outspoken opposition leader must be released

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Daher Ahmed Farah, an opposition party leader and director of his party's newspaper.

Daher Ahmed Farah, a prisoner of conscience, has been repeatedly arrested because of his peacefully-held political opinions. He started a three-month prison sentence in Gabode prison in Djibouti-ville on 9 July 2003 after the prosecutor won an appeal against his acquittal on a charge of libel (*diffamation*) against the army's Chief of Staff and an army women's folklore group. The appeal court imposed a six-month prison sentence (with three months suspended), heavy damages and a fine, and banned the party's newspaper for six months.

"Public officials who consider themselves defamed have the right of reply and if that is insufficient they can legitimately resort to legal actions to defend their reputation," Amnesty International said. "But this should not involve, as it has done in Daher Ahmed Farah's case, detention by the police, arbitrary refusal of bail (*liberté provisoire*), state prosecution and prison sentences."

Djibouti's constitution guarantees freedom of the press, and just last year Djibouti ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which protects the right to freedom of expression.

"Criminal legislation contravening the right to freedom of expression, which the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has called 'a cornerstone of democracy', has been used to stifle media criticism of the authorities and silence a prominent peaceful opponent," said Amnesty International.

Background

Daher Ahmed Farah is the president of the opposition Movement for Democratic Renewal and Development (*Mouvement pour le renouveau démocratique et le développement*, MRD) and director of its newspaper, Djibouti Renewal (*Le Renouveau djiboutien*).

He was detained in March 2003 on account of an article he published, summarily convicted the next day for "undermining army morale" and "publishing false information". He was given a six-month prison sentence and fine. The following month he received a second six-month suspended sentence, which was reduced on appeal.

Days later, he was re-arrested on the basis of a complaint by the army's Chief of Staff. He was detained for over a month before being granted bail, rearrested two days later, and tried and acquitted on 23 June. The acquittal was reversed on 9 July when Daher Ahmed Farah was returned to prison.

Public Document

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