

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 52/006/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 171
17 July 2003

Somalia/Somaliland: Political leaders must recognize the legitimate role of human rights defenders

Somali human rights defenders in all areas must be given a central role in the difficult struggle ahead for sustained peace, democracy and human rights, Amnesty International urged today, as the Somalia peace and reconciliation conference in Kenya moves, within the next month, to establish a transitional federal government by selecting a four-year parliament which will elect the president. Somaliland is proceeding separately to its own parliamentary elections after the recent presidential elections.

"Civil society in Somalia, and particularly human rights defenders with a track record of activism, must be supported and empowered, and given a strong participatory role in the transitional period. Faction leaders must be pressed to affirm and demonstrate commitment to human rights," Amnesty International said.

Somali human rights defenders from different parts of Somalia and Somaliland came together in February 2003 at an Amnesty International workshop to strengthen their work and support each other. The workshop report is now being released to publicise and support their activities, and to press Somali political leaders to recognize their legitimate role in promoting and protecting human rights.

Human rights defenders in Somalia and Somaliland are at the forefront of the struggle for the respect of human rights. They voice the concerns of Somalis and in particular victims of human rights abuses and their families. In defending others, they themselves risk becoming targets.

Women's and minorities' rights are on the human rights agenda in all areas. Human rights defenders in Somalia, a country wracked by years of civil war, will be working particularly to develop the rule of law, build institutions of good governance, and end human rights abuses by the political factions and their undisciplined militias.

Somaliland, without international recognition so far, has achieved much in the protection of personal security and human rights. Local human rights defenders are urging more rapid progress towards effective and fair administration of justice, including juvenile justice, and improved safeguards against arbitrary detention.

This new report explains the work of Somali human rights defenders in the context of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. The human rights background is described, from the repressive Siad Barre government since 1969 and the subsequent clan-based faction fighting since state collapse in 1991, up to the present unsteady ceasefire. The report also sets out the risks and dangers which human

rights defenders have experienced (and often overcome) in their diverse environments, and outlines the work ahead.

The report describes the experiences shared by participants at the workshop which was held in Hargeisa. They came from 23 well-established Somali non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from Mogadishu, Baidoa, Kismayu and Puntland as well as Hargeisa, who are working for freedom of expression and association, justice and the rule of law, women's human rights, minority rights, and development and humanitarian projects.

The unanimous adoption of a Declaration of Somali Human Rights Defenders at the workshop illustrates their resolve to increase their struggle against human rights abuses, and to work for the equal rights of all, with full protection for vulnerable groups such as women and minorities. They opposed impunity for faction leaders and former officials who had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in the past, and declared that "if they were allowed to hold government office they could commit such crimes again."

They called on all Somali political authorities to publicly recognize the legitimate role of human rights defenders.

They also appealed to the international community for rehabilitation and development assistance, and for help to protect Somali human rights defenders and assist them to build their capacity and influence.

The 34-page report: Somalia and Somaliland: Supporting and strengthening the work of Somali human rights defenders - a workshop report, is available at : <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf520042003>

The workshop was co-sponsored by Novib (Oxfam-Netherlands) through its Somali civil society program and International Cooperation for Development (ICD) which works with Somaliland NGOs.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>