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SOMALILAND: Leaders of new opposition party arrested

Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of three leaders of an emergent opposition party who were arrested in the Somaliland capital of Hargeisa on 28 July.

They are Mohamed Abdi "Gabose", a neurologist and former minister in the Somaliland and Somalia Governments; Mohamed Hashi Elmi, a civil engineer and former Mayor of Hargeisa; and Jamal Aideed, a telecommunications businessperson. They are respectively the chairperson, the vice-chairperson and the second vice-chairperson of the *Qaran* party ("The Nation"), which is not so far legally registered but had begun informal political activities in advance of the local elections expected to be held in December 2007.

The Interior Minister had some days earlier warned the three *Qaran* party leaders to stop holding public meetings and threatened them with serious criminal charges, accusing them of "fuelling unrest". To Amnesty International's knowledge, there have been no demonstrations or violent incidents involving *Qaran* supporters.

The three men are detained in Mandera prison, 70 kilometres east of Hargeisa. They were taken to court and remanded for investigation into alleged unlawful political activities. They have not so far been charged with any offence and have been held incommunicado since 3 August 2007, after initially being allowed access to their legal representatives and families.

Amnesty International considers these three people to be prisoners of conscience. It is concerned that they may be detained without charge or trial for a prolonged period, or subjected to an unfair trial.

Background

In the last elections in 2002, only three political parties (one government-linked and two in opposition) were allowed, due to the proliferation of parties at the time and to prevent the formation of parties based on clan affiliations. There is currently no mechanism for registering new parties as the registration committee was disbanded in 2002.

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 functioning institutions of governance, with a government through a multi-party system.

Three previous prisoners of conscience were journalists of *Haatuf* newspaper. They were detained in January 2007, subjected to unfair trial and variously imprisoned for two years and 29 months, then released by presidential pardon in late March.