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## **Somalia: Al-Shabab must immediately free human rights activist**

The Somali armed opposition group al-Shabab must immediately free a human rights defender it captured last week and stop its relentless attacks on other activists, Amnesty International said today.

Alin Hilowle Hassan, director of Isha, a human rights organization in the Bay and Bakool region of southern Somalia, was captured at his home on the evening of 16 April by armed al-Shabab members in Baidoa, the region's capital.

"Al-Shabab's attacks on human rights defenders and journalists are an attempt to silence any report on the gross abuses they are committing against the civilian population, said Michelle Kagari, deputy director of Amnesty International's Africa program. "Al-Shabab must immediately free human rights defender Alin Hilowle Hassan and ensure that he is not tortured or harmed in any way".

The group has reportedly refused to allow relatives of Alin Hilowle, 47, to visit him in the central prison of Baidoa. Al Shabab has controlled Baidoa since January 2009.

Amnesty International has since received information that the human rights defender may have been transferred to one of the districts of the capital Mogadishu under the control of al-Shabab.

Al-Shabab members in Baidoa also seized Alin Hilowle's computer and a USB flash disk, which contained information relating to the work of Isha, during the raid on his home.

Prior to Alin Hilowle's abduction al-Shabab had accused the Isha human rights organization of spying for foreign powers and had already seized equipment at their office in Baidoa.

"Armed opposition groups continue to intimidate Somali civil society activists" said Michelle Kagari. "Al-Shabab and others must respect the right of all Somalis to freedom of expression and end the pattern of repression and fear they inflict on human rights activists and journalists."

On 3 April, the armed opposition group Hizbul Islam ordered radio stations to stop broadcasting music, claiming it was un-Islamic.

On 9 April, al-Shabab banned the BBC and VOA from broadcasting in areas under its control, claiming they were opposed to an "Islamic administration" and seized the BBC satellite dishes and FM transmitters. Most radio stations had to stop relaying BBC programs and airing music, for fear of reprisals by armed opposition groups.

Somali human rights defenders and journalists have been victims of targeted killings, death threats, abductions and attacks over the past three years. Many civil society activists have been forced into exile

because of such threats and those remaining in Somalia remain at grave risk.

“Somali civil society needs protection now”, said Michelle Kagari. “The international community should not wait any longer to tackle the widespread impunity that grips Somalia.”

## Background

Al-Shabab currently controls vast areas of south and central Somalia, including major cities such as Merka, Kismayo and Baidoa, as well as districts of the capital Mogadishu.

The internationally-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia exercises authority only in part of the capital and is repeatedly attacked by al Shabab and other armed groups.

Al- Shabab armed groups have grown out of the Islamic Courts Union, a movement that temporarily established control over Mogadishu and other areas in 2006.

The Islamic Courts Union were militarily defeated by Ethiopian troops who intervened in Somalia in late 2006 to assist the Transitional Federal Government.

After Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, a former Islamic Courts Union leader, was appointed President of the TFG in January 2009, and Ethiopian troops left Somalia, al-Shabab and other armed groups have continued fighting against the TFG, claiming that it is allied to Western nations.