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Somalia: Somali Human Rights Day message (22 July 2003) from Amnesty International's Secretary General

On this special occasion of Somali Human Rights Day, which is being marked in Mogadishu by the Dr Ismail Jumaale Human Rights Organization and other human rights organizations, I send the best wishes of Amnesty International for your important work in the months ahead for lasting peace, democracy, human rights and reconstruction in Somalia.

As the peace and reconciliation conference moves towards establishing a transitional federal government in the next few weeks, it is more important than ever that civil society in Somalia is supported and empowered. By civil society I mean particularly the independent groups and individuals who are committed to human rights and have not been the ones violating anybody's rights, now or in the past. These human rights defenders should have a strong participatory role in the transitional period as monitors and advocates of human rights.

They are needed, for example, to monitor the cease-fire which faction leaders have signed but often broken, leading to numerous killings of unarmed men, women and children. The international arms embargo must also be monitored to stop the flow of weapons of war. They will also record and campaign against the daily abuses of human rights which are still occurring in Mogadishu and certain other areas. If people are killed by faction militias or kidnapped by gunmen; if women are raped by gunmen; if minorities are treated as if they have no rights at all - it is civil society groups who must investigate and publicly report these abuses. They must press those who claim they have power to bring justice for the victims and punish those who are responsible for crimes.

You may know that Somali human rights defenders from different areas including some of your colleagues in Mogadishu came together in February 2003 at an Amnesty International workshop to strengthen their work and support each other. These courageous individuals are working, often at risk to themselves and their families, for the rights of freedom of opinion and the press, justice and the rule of law, women's human rights, minority rights, and for development and humanitarian projects.

They unanimously adopted a Declaration of Somali Human Rights Defenders, where they resolved to increase their struggle against human rights abuses. They said they will work

for the equal rights of all, especially 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 and guarantee their safety. The new transitional government about to be formed will be expected to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as the Transitional Charter and Laws of Somalia, and the international human rights treaties binding on Somalia. Government leaders and members of parliament must pledge themselves to protect human rights. As a criterion for being given office, they should be asked to make this pledge to the public and to explain their past record on human rights so that they are truly accountable to their fellow-citizens.

The Somali human rights defenders 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. Amnesty International will play its part in pressing for this assistance from governments, the United Nations and other international bodies. We will continue to support our Somali sisters and brothers who are equally members of the global human rights community.

Amnesty International has also called for the establishment of an independent and impartial National Human Rights Commission in Somalia, which should include respected members of civil society and human rights defenders, and prevent any return to the abuses of the past.

I ask all of you now who are celebrating Somali Human Rights Day and taking part in the day's events and activities to support these messages of human rights and to continue to defend those who defend your rights.

In solidarity,

Irene Khan
Secretary General, Amnesty International