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Public Statement

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Somaliland: Journalists who fled grave human rights violations in Mogadishu under threat of expulsion

Amnesty International today expressed concern at the Somaliland Government's order of expulsion against 24 Somali journalists who had fled to the Somaliland capital of Hargeisa from violence and grave human rights violations against media workers in Mogadishu.

The journalists, who worked for Shabelle Media, Hornafrik Media Network, Simba Radio and Dayniile On-line, fled from Mogadishu over the last three months.

The majority arrived in Hargeisa after the recent increase in fighting in Mogadishu in November. The Somaliland Government has allowed numerous people displaced by the conflict in southern and central Somalia to enter Somaliland and find safety there. The displaced 24 journalists are being supported by the officially-recognized Somaliland Journalists Association (SOLJA).

Yesterday (4 December), the Somaliland Commissioner of Police, General Mohamed Dubad Sangadhi, told them, "Your presence here is endangering the national security of Somaliland, therefore, this is an order, you must leave this country in 24 hours, failing which you will be taken to a court of law." The Commissioner of Police was later interviewed by the BBC Somali Service, and quoted as stating these journalists were threatening the security of Somaliland by writing stories against "our Ethiopian friends." Today, Somaliland Government officials stated that the deadline for them to leave had been extended for a number of days.

A number of the 24 journalists had shortly before this incident told an Amnesty International delegation visiting Hargeisa that they had been subject to repeated death threats during their work in Mogadishu. They also stated they had been targeted to be killed, either by members of the security forces of the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG) and the Ethiopian military force supporting it, or by the insurgents or unidentified armed men. Some had also been briefly detained by TFG militias on 18 September 2007, during a raid on the offices of Shabelle Media.

Amnesty International is gravely concerned that by expelling these 24 journalists, the Government of Somaliland would be undermining its obligation to protect them. As persons displaced by violence and fleeing from the threat of grave human rights abuses, the primary concern of the Government of Somaliland should be to ensure their safety. Any arbitrary expulsion of those displaced would violate their human rights and put their safety at risk.

Amnesty calls upon the Government of Somaliland not to expel these journalists, and to continue to provide them with protection and safety if they wish to stay in Somaliland. Their human rights should be respected in Somaliland, including their right to freedom of expression. To Amnesty International's knowledge, they have committed no offence in Somaliland and] representatives of the Government of Somaliland have indicated that they are not accused of any crime.

Background

The situation for journalists in Somalia has continued to deteriorate, with at least eight journalists killed with impunity this year. The TFG has repeatedly shut down media houses and arrested journalists, although usually only for short periods, with Shabelle Media, Simba Radio and Banadir Radio stations all closed down in the last month. A recent new media law imposes new restrictions on the private media, and has led to virtually all media being shut down until yesterday (4 December). Journalists also receive frequent death threats believed to come from armed groups opposed to the TFG and Ethiopian troops, as a result of their coverage of the conflict and their reporting on human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict.

Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991 after the overthrow of the former Siad Barre government, and continues to seek international recognition. It is the only part of the former Somali Republic to have a government elected under a multi-party democratic system, and a functioning system of governance.