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Somalia/Ethiopia: Release children held in raid on Al Hidya mosque

Amnesty International today called on the Ethiopian military to release some 41 children held after a raid on Mogadishu's Al Hidya mosque on 19 April 2008, which left 21 people dead.

"The safety and welfare of the children, some as young as nine years old, must be paramount for all parties," said Amnesty International.

Witnesses have told Amnesty International that Ethiopian forces would only release the children from their military base in north Mogadishu "once they had been investigated" and "if they were not terrorists". While Amnesty International has received reports that a small number of children were released yesterday, the majority are still being held by Ethiopian forces.

Amnesty International strongly condemns the targeted killing of civilians in the raid. Eleven of the 21 dead were killed inside the mosque, including the Iman Sheik Saiid Yahya, Sheik Abdullah Mohamud and several Tabliq Islamic scholars. Eye-witnesses report that those killed inside the mosque were unarmed civilians taking no active part in hostilities. Seven of the 21 were reported to have died after their throats were cut – a form of extra-judicial execution practised by Ethiopian forces in Somalia. A spokesman for the Ethiopian government has denied the involvement of Ethiopian troops in these killings.

"The UN Security Council must take steps to end impunity across Somalia by launching an International Commission of Inquiry, or similar mechanism, to investigate human rights violations committed during the armed conflict," said Amnesty International.

For their part, the Ethiopian Government and Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia must ensure an independent investigation into these killings; any Ethiopian soldiers found responsible must be prosecuted in line with international fair trial standards and without recourse to the death penalty.

Background

The attack on the Al Hidya mosque occurred during two days of fighting between the Ethiopian military and TFG against armed groups opposed to them, in which the Elman Human Rights Organisation documented 81 deaths and more than one hundred injured. It is not known how many of these were civilians. The attack also followed increasing attacks by armed groups opposed to the TFG on towns in southern and central Somalia, including an attack on Beledweyne by Al-Shabab militia on 13 April, where local residents reported that militia members killed four teachers. An Al-Shabab leader has claimed the teachers were shot in crossfire.