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SOMALI HUMAN RIGHTS DAY, 22 JULY 2005

Amnesty International sends its warm greetings to human rights defenders and their supporters in Somalia on the occasion of Somali Human Rights Day.

To those gathered to commemorate Somali Human Rights Day in Mogadishu today, and especially the Dr. Ismail Jumaale Human Rights Organization which organizes this important annual event, we send our support and solidarity at this difficult stage in the history of Somalia.

A year ago, the Somalia Peace and Reconciliation Conference taking place in Kenya was nearing completion. By the beginning of this year, after 14 years of state collapse and civil wars, Somalia had a Constitution, a Parliament, a President and a Government on an interim basis. The five-year transitional period towards an elected democratic government for the Somali Republic was about to begin. The world community and the Somali refugee diaspora watched in hope that this would bring an end to the constant pattern of arbitrary killings of civilians and even humanitarian workers, kidnappings, rape and looting in many areas, committed by warlords and faction militias with total impunity.

As the Transitional Federal Government took office in January this year, Amnesty International appealed for human rights to be a central element throughout the transitional period. It called for respect for the valuable work being done by independent and active human rights defenders and peace activists to achieve peace and security in all parts of the country. It urged all groups to build a human rights culture to protect all citizens, particularly the vulnerable categories of women, minorities, internally displaced persons and children. It also asked the international community to give generous support for reconstruction.

Six months later, the Government is not yet established in the country, and demobilization and disarmament of militias is only just beginning. Amid this continuing absence of security, Amnesty International was extremely saddened by the deliberate and politically-motivated murder earlier this month of a prominent peace activist and human rights defender, Abdulkadir Yahya Ali, director of the Centre for Research and Dialogue. Many tributes have been paid to his steadfast work for peace, reconciliation and a new Somalia. What he struggled for will not be lost, and the tragic manner of his death will create redoubled determination - not fear - among those many human rights defenders who will continue the struggle.

Around the world, we see massive abuses of human rights, by governments and armed groups, who seem to benefit for a time from impunity and being called to account. There is still insufficient international action to prevent the flow of arms to those who violate human rights and humanitarian laws. In the end, respect for the whole range of universal human rights and the rule of law will be the best defence against "terrorism" and the best hope for justice, freedom and human dignity.

Global activism for human rights, debt cancellation and poverty reduction is a dynamic and growing force. So is the international humanitarianism displayed in response to the tsunami disaster. Yet what has greatest impact on human rights locally is local activism at the grassroots level. We honour it in Somalia, and in all other countries of the world, as a constantly growing force for change and progress, which governments who are concerned to benefit their citizens should welcome and support.

The work being done by Somali human rights defenders has been valuable in publicizing and denouncing human rights abuses, conducting human rights education and awareness-raising workshops, and training people in monitoring and reporting on human rights. Journalists have been threatened, detained, attacked and even killed – as was sadly the case with Ms Dunia Muhidin recently - but the strong defence of the freedom of the media in Somalia has been impressive. More men as well as women are standing up for women’s rights – the rights, for instance, to freedom from violence in armed conflict and violence from harmful traditional practices in the community and the home. Issues of discrimination and social exclusion are beginning to be addressed.

I conclude by expressing our solidarity with Somali human rights defenders, and sending the best wishes of Amnesty International for your celebration of Somali Human Rights Day,

Kolawole Olaniyan (Dr)

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