

PUBLIC

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Further information on EXTRA 15/99 (AFR 23/01/99, 8 February 1999) and follow-up (AFR 23/02/99, 16 February 1999) - Prisoner of Conscience

DJIBOUTI Aref Mohamed Aref, human rights defender and lawyer

Aref Mohamed Aref was released on 11 May 1999 under an amnesty granted by new president Ismail Omar Guelleh, who took office three days earlier. He was one of 47 convicted prisoners released under the amnesty.

Although he has been released, he has been banned from practising as a lawyer for five years. The ban was imposed by the Appeal Court on 5 May, when it gave judgement on his appeal against his six-month prison term. The hearing was brief and was held with less than a day's advance notice.

He had been on hunger strike with other prisoners protesting against denial of medical treatment. The hunger strike has now ended and medical treatment is being provided. Other prisoners charged with armed conspiracy and links with the armed opposition group *Front pour la restauration des droits et de la démocratie* (FRUD, Front for the restoration of rights and democracy), remain in prison awaiting a long-delayed trial.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Aref Mohamed Aref had been sentenced to six months in prison on criminal charges in a politically motivated trial in February 1999. On 5 December 1998 the Djibouti security forces had stopped him from travelling to Paris to attend a Human Rights Defenders Summit organised by Amnesty International and other international human rights organisations. He had previously attended an African Human Rights Defenders conference organised by Amnesty International in South Africa in November 1998. He is a member of a network of human rights defenders in Africa and is the leading human rights lawyer in Djibouti.

No further action is required by the network. Many thanks to all who sent appeals.