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Public Statement

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Somalia: Amnesty International denounces abuses in escalating Mogadishu conflict and killing of human rights defender

Heavy fighting is currently taking place in Mogadishu as forces of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the large Ethiopian army force supporting it have been attacked by armed opposition groups. Several captured TFG or Ethiopian soldiers were dragged through the streets by their feet, stoned and set on fire. Dozens of civilians have been killed or wounded in cross-fire.

Amnesty International calls on both sides in the conflict to respect international humanitarian law and human rights, including taking all possible measures to avoid harming civilians, facilitating humanitarian assistance, and not subjecting prisoners to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or execution.

Shortly before the worsening of the conflict, Isse Abdi Isse, 42, a well-known Somali human rights defender and director of KISIMA Peace and Development Organization in the south-western port of Kismayu, was shot dead by an unknown assailant in south Mogadishu in the early evening of 14 March. He was murdered near Kamal Hotel by a group of three men while he was attending a UNICEF-sponsored conference on psycho-social support for children affected by civil war, drought and floods.

Amnesty International condemns this murder of a well-known human rights defender, which appears to have been perpetrated by an armed opposition group. He had conducted vigorous human rights defence work independently and without any political or clan partiality, but had received threats from unidentified sources.

This tragic incident highlights the increasing security risks for human rights defenders in particular in a situation of escalating violence in Mogadishu. Amnesty International urges the authorities to investigate the killing of Isse Abdi Isse and bring the perpetrators to justice, and provide protection for human rights defenders working for peace and justice.

Isse Abdi Isse was a founder of KISIMA, a leading independent NGO founded in Kismayu in Lower Juba region in 1998. He was well-known to Somali civil society organizations and international organizations and NGOs based in Nairobi, Kenya. KISIMA has been in contact with Amnesty International and is a member of an Oxfam-Novib Somali Civil Society network and the Uganda-based East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network.

Isse Abdi Issa, married with four children, had actively led KISIMA's humanitarian and human rights advocacy work, particularly for internally-displaced persons, women's and minorities' rights, drought and flood victims, peace-building and reconciliation. The conference he was attending was organised by a

Ugandan NGO, Transcultural Psycho-Social Organization (TPO). He had earlier served an internship with a Kenyan NGO, People Against Torture.

His murder was strongly condemned by Somali human rights defenders, as well as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Independent Expert for Somalia, and the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia, among others.

Amnesty International recently called on the African Union and the United Nations to ensure that the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the proposed subsequent UN peace-keeping operation have a strong human rights mandate. This should include human rights monitoring and protection of human rights defenders and humanitarian workers.

Background

After 16 years of state collapse, Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) has not yet established control in Mogadishu, and is just beginning to build a police force and judicial system. Tens of thousands of civilians have fled the escalating violence in Mogadishu in the past three months. There have been daily attacks in past weeks against the TFG and the Ethiopian military force, and also against the Ugandan contingent of the AMISOM force too, by remnants of the defeated forces of the Council of Somali Islamic Courts (COSIC) and other allegedly clan-based armed opposition elements. Ethiopian and TFG forces have responded indiscriminately to attacks by opponents and caused hundreds of civilian casualties

Amnesty International is investigating reports of human rights violations by TFG and Ethiopian forces against civilians, including journalists, such as extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions and rapes.