

EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK

Press Release

3rd August 2009

KAMPALA: **U.S. should act on impunity in Somalia**

U.S Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton's visit to Kenya this week offers the ideal opportunity for the Obama administration to demonstrate that ending impunity and establishing human rights accountability mechanisms top its agenda in Somalia.

Whilst in Kenya, as part of a wider trip that will take the Secretary of State to six other African nations, Clinton will meet with the President of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia, Sheikh Sharif Ahmed. The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP) urges the Secretary of State to use this occasion to highlight the administration's support for the establishment of accountability mechanisms, notably an independent international commission of inquiry.

Somali human rights defenders have repeatedly spoken out against the widespread human rights violations occurring in Somalia and have called for those responsible to be held to account. These efforts, however, have come at a high cost; many, particularly journalists, have been forced to go into hiding, exile or paid with their lives. Nonetheless, these efforts require concrete support not only from national authorities, notably the current TFG, but also from key regional and international actors.

"Human rights organisations both inside Somalia and outside have repeatedly described how tackling the culture of impunity in Somalia is key to bringing about peace to this war-torn country. Yet the human rights crisis continues to deteriorate. Now is the time for key actors to act. We hope that Secretary of State Hilary Clinton will this week show that the US administration is committed to ensuring human rights accountability" says Mr. Hassan Shire Sheikh, Executive Director of EHAHRDP.

Among other measures, committing to human rights accountability would entail the Secretary of State to support efforts to establish a more permanent international human rights monitoring presence on the ground. Such a presence, notably under the auspices of the United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR), will serve to map out past and present human rights violations, through the establishment of a commission of inquiry, and pave the way to long-term accountability. This will evidently play a key role in re-enforcing the work and efforts of Somalia HRDs.

Background

The human rights situation in Somalia has shown little to no improvements in spite of the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops in January 2009 and the election of Mr. Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed as the country's president and head of the TFG. Warfare between the TFG forces and

the insurgency, notably Al-Shabab, persists. All warring parties have at one time or another committed serious human rights violations and abuses of humanitarian law. Fighting has continued in civilian areas of Mogadishu whilst also intensifying in towns in South and Central Somalia. Civilians bear the brunt of the acute conflict. Attacks and targeted killings of human rights defenders, particularly journalists also continue to occur, most notably at the hands of Al-Shabab. And yet impunity prevails.

Efforts aimed at ending impunity and setting up effective accountability mechanisms in Somalia have been a key focus of EHAHRDP's engagement on Somalia with key actors at the regional (notably at the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR)) as well as at the international level (at the UN Human Rights Council and in Washington DC.). These efforts have played a part in increasing awareness amongst stakeholders of the acuteness of the violations. As of yet however, these stakeholders have failed to devise concrete responses to the human rights situation.

EHAHRDP would therefore like to re-iterate the recommendations recently made in a meeting with Senator Feingold in Washington DC on 15th June 2009, and call on the Secretary of State to;

- Support the establishment of an independent international Commission of Inquiry into human rights and humanitarian law violations, both past and present, committed by all actors involved in the conflict, including the Ethiopian troops, as a means of mapping out the worst abuses;
- Promote the establishment of a permanent international human rights presence on the ground in Somalia to guarantee systematic monitoring and reporting of the human rights situation;
- Provide support - logistical, political and financial - to entities and bodies that can establish effective accountability mechanisms, based on the findings of the Commission of Inquiry above mentioned.

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