

EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS PROJECT

Press release

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Djibouti: Free Human Rights Activist Jean Paul Noel Abdi

Kampala – The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (EHAHRD-Net) calls on the Djibouti authorities to release Jean-Paul Noel Abdi, the President of the Djiboutian League of Human Rights, focal point organization of East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project, who was arrested on February 09, 2011. The arrest violates his right to free expression, and comes just months before the country holds its presidential elections in April 2011.

Information received from the Network indicates that Jean-Paul was arrested by the national police, charged with participation in an insurrectional movement under article 145 and 146.4 of the Penal Code. The penalty for this is 15 years in prison and a fine of seven million Djiboutian francs. The arrest is in connection to his investigations and reporting on the arrest and detention of students protesting. The student protest that took place in Djibouti city four days before his arrest was in response to a low pass rate this year and the quality of the education system. Currently only his sister and lawyer have been allowed to see him

EHAHRD-Net notes with concern the continued harassment of Mr. Noel Abdi by the Djiboutian government, related to his work as a human rights defender. In November 2006, Mr. Noel Abdi was hindered from traveling to Entebbe, Uganda for the sub-regional Journalists' Conference organised by the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project. His passport was captured by the Djiboutian authorities at the time, though no clear case had been brought against him at the time. In February 2008, he was put under house arrest as two persons claiming to be military but in civilian clothes prevented him from leaving his home, without any warrant.

“Jean Paul’s arrest is just one example of the restrictions on freedom of expression in Djibouti,” said Hassan Shire Sheikh, Executive Director East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project. “We are deeply saddened by the continued infringement on the rights of human rights defenders in Djibouti. The government of Djibouti should drop all charges against Jean Paul including the pending ones, and observe the rights of human rights defenders as stipulated in the 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.”

Background

Human rights groups in Djibouti do not operate freely and most of the civil society organisations in the country have links with the government. The main, if only, independent human rights organisation the Djibouti League for Human Rights (*Ligue Djiboutienne des Droits Humains* - LDDH), EHAHRD-Net Focal Point, operates with limited freedom. In fact, the President of LDDH, Mr. Jean-Paul Noel Abdi, has been awaiting his appeal to be heard since April 2007. Despite regular

interventions by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and by the Special Rapporteur of the UN on HRDs, the trial continues to be delayed.

This also comes at a time when the country is preparing for its election in 2011. Recently, Djibouti's parliament approved a constitutional amendment removing term limits allowing the current president Ismail Omar Guelleh to run for the third term, most certainly in the forthcoming elections. In 1999, President Guelleh succeeded his uncle, who was the country's first president, and he was re-elected in 2005 in what was seen as a one-man Presidential elections since he was the sole candidate of the Union for a Presidential Majority (UPM). The opposition parties claimed that they were prevented from campaigning as a result of government control over the media and repression of the opposition's activities and therefore boycotted the elections which they saw as neither free nor fair.

EHAHRD-Net calls on the Djibouti Government to:

- Immediately drop all charges against Jean Paul and also clear him of any pending appeals
- Accord space to human rights defenders in Djibouti to continue carrying out their work without any hindrance especially as elections draw near
- More generally, comply with the provisions of the Universal declaration of Human Rights and regional instruments and international treaties ratified by Djibouti

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