

EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK

Oral intervention on the report of Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders in Africa

51st Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

Presented by Hassan Shire Sheikh, East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network

Honorable Chairperson, commissioners, distinguished delegates,

Allow me to start by honouring the memory of Jean-Paul Noel Abdi, a tireless Djiboutian human rights defender who sadly passed away on 13th April. Jean-Paul was the president of the Djiboutian Human Rights League, a long-time member of our Network and well-known to many of you here.

The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network would like to thank the honorable commissioner, Mme Reine Alapini-Gansou, for her valuable work on the situation of human rights defenders in Africa, and to welcome her back to this important mandate. EHAHRD-Net looks forward to working closely with the mandate in the study group on freedom of association.

EHAHRD-Net continues to be concerned about the situation of human rights defenders in our region, which shows few signs of improving. It is for this reason that we are obliged to repeat our concerns about the restrictions on civil society space in Ethiopia and Sudan, as two key examples, although those States are not alone in such violations.

In Ethiopia, since the passing of the Charities and Societies Proclamation in 2009, restrictions on civil society have severely impeded the work of human rights organisations in the country. Three years on the negative impact of the law is becoming more and more apparent.

Human rights NGOs may receive no more than 10% of their funding from foreign sources. On 8th December 2009, the Ethiopian Charities and Societies Agency (CSA) ordered the freezing of the bank accounts of the Human Rights Council (HRCO), Ethiopia's oldest and most prominent human rights group. HRCO appeal against the move on the grounds that the CSA did not distinguish between foreign funds received after the new regulations came into force and funds collected from local and foreign sources since 1991. The outcome of the appeal, which is currently being considered by the Supreme Court, will have a significant impact on the ability of HRCO and other Ethiopian human rights groups to continue their work.

Since early 2011, the National Intelligence and Security Services in Sudan have imposed increased restrictions on freedom of expression in response to protests inspired by the Arab Spring. Numerous student activists have been arrested, detained and ill-treated, including rape and torture, and the crackdown continues. On 28th March 2012, for example, student activist Haidar Mahmoud Abderrahman Manis was arrested and is still detained in an unknown location, at risk of torture with

no access to his family or lawyer. He had reportedly given speeches at a number of campuses on the situation in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Niles States. A university professor, Mohamed Zain Al-Abideen, was released without charge on 4th March having been held incommunicado for 15 days by the NISS. He was interrogated on an article he had written criticizing the president on issues of government corruption and nepotism. These are just two examples from the many human rights defenders to be arrested and detained in recent months.

In light of these concerns, EHAHRD-Net would like to encourage the Special Rapporteur to carry out country visits to Ethiopia and Sudan to assess these pressing situations further. We also call on the respective governments to invite the Special Rapporteur and other members of the Commission to visit their countries.

Finally, Madame Chairperson, EHAHRD-Net encourages the Special Rapporteur, in continuing to monitor the situation of human rights defenders, to establish a reporting mechanism to gather information on cases of reprisals against human rights defenders who cooperate with the Commission and its special mechanisms.

I thank you.