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Somalia: Prof. Mahmoud Ahmed-Hamdi, a humanist, is now in hiding outside of Somalia

HRWF (25.06.2020) – On 2 March 2020, Professor Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi informed HRWF about alarming death threats targeting him in Somalia. HRWF and Humanists International helped him relocate to a neighbouring country. As he was also a human rights defender, HRWF successfully applied for a grant on his behalf through Prisoners of Conscience.

Professor Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi was a university lecturer in Somalia until he was arrested on 21 March 2019 for a

Facebook post that authorities deemed to be “blasphemy.” He was then sentenced on 30 April 2019 to 2 1/2 years in prison.

In the Facebook post that led to his conviction in April 2019, Professor Ahmed-Hamdi commented on the need to take a more proactive approach to recurring droughts in Somalia that have been devastating for individuals and the state as a whole. The current strategy to preventing and combatting these droughts is to pray. This was his Facebook post in response to that:

‘The advanced countries make rain but we are still praying to get rain, although despite our prayers we are still suffering every year from drought.

The advanced countries, those we are considering that they are unbelievers and God hates them, live in prosperity even if God hates them. It means that they overcame God by knowledge and using reason.

So, we should learn and base our life on reason and knowledge, not on Myths.’

After spending ten months and seven days in prison, Professor Ahmed-Hamdi received conditional presidential amnesty and was released on 27 January 2020. However, the conditions of his release entailed severe limitations on his freedom.

Threats of violence and death

Professor Ahmed-Hamdi had previously received death threats targeting both him and his wife due to his advocacy for human rights, but now that he has been convicted of blasphemy, he is

at risk from both the state and non-state actors.

He had been banned from working as a professor and could not share his thoughts, beliefs or knowledge with anyone in any form; otherwise he risked more jailtime or even the death sentence.

After Professor Ahmed-Hamdi was arrested, an individual sent his wife an email saying: 'once your husband leaves prison I will kill him.'

Furthermore, Professor Ahmed-Hamdi emailed HRWF on 2 March 2020 about another death threat, one that was of particular concern as it had the potential to incite an entire congregation to violence:

'In the Friday [28 February 2020] prayer sermon, a preacher called Adam Sunnah spoke about me and demanded to kill me, as he denounced the prison sentence that I spent because he said that the legal ruling that I deserve is murder.

This preacher was imprisoned several times for terrorism, and he was released from prison only four months ago, as we were together in the same prison, but in two different blocks.

In this sermon he speaks in the first half of it about another Somali writer who is now residing in the West, and in the second section starting from minute 28 he starts talking about me in a very provocative way.'

You can find the recording of this sermon here:
<https://youtu.be/vQNRJS37fq8>.

From 2019 until the end of January 2020, HRWF's Database of FoRB Prisoners in the world only contained one humanist in prison in Somalia: Professor Mahmoud Jama AHMED-HAMDI.

HRWF Comment: Prison sentences for humanists and atheists

Atheists suffer a wide range of penalties and discrimination in many countries today.

Egypt, which was ranked 185th out of 196 countries by the Freedom of Thought Report 2019 of *Humanists International*, has been the most dangerous place for humanists, atheists and the non-religious in the world as it is the main country where they have been sentenced to prison terms on blasphemy and contempt of religion charges in the last decade.

However, in 2019 and as of June 2020, no atheist or humanist was in prison in Egypt while there are still a Sunni and a Coptic Orthodox in detention.

In June 2014, an appeal court upheld a **five-year sentence** handed down in absentia to **Karam Saber** for his short story collection entitled "Where is God?". The accusations against Saber included: Insulting the divine, writing short stories

which call for atheism, defaming divinity, and inciting strife. In his defense, Saber claimed that: “[In the stories], I expose the fake religious discourse and detect the scale of contradictions in a patriarchal society that claims religiousness while it practices the opposite, especially in terms of oppressing women. I pose simple questions that seek God amid all this absurdity we are living in”.

He was said to have violated Article 98 of the Egyptian Penal Code which provides a sentence of six months to five years and a fine of 500 to 1,000 Egyptian pounds [approximately €25 to €50 Euro] for anyone who uses religion to propagate ‘extremist ideas’ to incite strife, insult a monotheistic religion, or damage national unity.

In 2016, **Mustafa Abdel-Nabi** was charged with blasphemy for postings about atheism on his Facebook page and was ultimately sentenced in absentia to **three years in prison**.

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