



104 Children Released From Prison in Somaliland

Steps taken to protect children's rights in justice proceedings

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104 children aged 15–18 have been released from eight prisons in Somaliland (Northwest Somalia). This event follows the enactment of the new Juvenile Justice Law for Somaliland in April 2008.

The law has introduced well founded provisions to protect the rights of children in legal proceedings. These include an increase in the age of criminal responsibility to 15 years and the stipulation that imprisonment of children should be as a measure of last resort for the shortest possible period.

Under a Presidential decree pardon, announced to commemorate Eid Al Fitr, the children were released on Tuesday, 21 October into the care of their communities. Many had been imprisoned on charges such as truancy, vagrancy or Asi Al-Walidain (disobedience to parents).

Before their release, the children were evaluated and given two days of individual counseling and psycho social support. Upon release, services to reintegrate the children were immediately provided by the Justice for Children Project, a joint programme between UNICEF and the UNDP Rule of Law and Security (ROLS) Programme. The children were provided with clothing, food allowances and transport back to their communities. Those without parents will be further supported to enroll in vocational programmes.

Other activities will include the mobilization of communities to create protective environments to which the children can return: where they are not stigmatized but supported to become responsible and productive citizens. Community child protection committees will also support education of children through enrollment in formal and non-formal education programs for children who have come in to contact with the law.

17 year old Jama* was one of the children released on Tuesday. He was imprisoned for causing a disturbance at a wedding. As he recounted, "The police arrested [me and] sent me to detention. While in prison most of the discussions with the inmates related to the advanced ways of committing crimes. I hope I will not go back to prison"

At only 15 years old, Ahmed* said being in prison for the first time was not easy. “You get really scared. There are lice in our bodies and we don’t get proper education. Older people tell us all kinds of horrible stories and the guy who murdered his father is in the same cell as us. However I wish for a day I could be educated and lead a law-abiding life”.

UNICEF Representative for Somalia, Christian Balslev-Olesen welcomed the presidential decree and the initiatives taken by the Somaliland authorities noting that, “These actions will ensure a fair justice legal system for children and build greater awareness of child rights and the need for children to be protected when they come in contact with the law”

UNDP’s ROLS Programme Manager, Alejandro Bendaña said implementation of the ROLS Justice for Children Project had helped to strengthen the Judiciary, law enforcement and human rights in Somaliland. “The new Juvenile Justice Law takes precedence over all other laws relating to children in conflict with the law and we expect its provisions - such as community mechanisms to address juvenile misbehaviour - to be used more frequently to prevent the imprisonment of children,” he said.

*** Children's names changed to protect their identities.**

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