

## **Breakaway Somali republic arrests 3 politicians**

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By Hussein Ali Noor

HARGEISA, Somalia, July 28 (Reuters) - The government of the breakaway Somali republic of Somaliland on Saturday arrested three politicians planning to form an opposition party, in a move diplomats said could hurt its bid for sovereignty. Security forces arrested the leader of the Qaran political association, Mohamed Abdi Gaboose, and his deputies Mohamed Hashi Elmi and Jamal Aideed Ibrahim, and charged them with founding an illegal organization and creating instability.

A regional court ordered the three held at Mandera prison.

Somaliland permits by law only three political parties, a situation which Qaran has criticised repeatedly.

It wants voter registration -- due earlier this month -- to go ahead so that it can gain the numbers it needs to be among the three legally recognised parties ahead of presidential elections due on April 15.

All three existing parties, including that of President Dahir Rayale Kahin, oppose that.

"We strongly condemn the arrest of the leaders of the political organization. We strongly urge that they immediately be released," said Mohamed Saed Hirsi, chair of the Somaliland Lawyers' Association.

The government had no immediate comment.

### **FUNDS AT RISK**

Diplomats say the arrests may put at risk funds which the government hoped to get for local elections due later this year.

"This would obviously jeopardise the democratic process the international community is willing to support," said a Nairobi-based diplomat who declined to be named.

"By doing so, Somaliland is probably jeopardising its efforts to gain recognition for its sovereignty."

Somaliland, in the northwestern corner of Somalia bordering Ethiopia, broke away from the rest of the country in 1991, when warlords overthrew last national president Mohamed Siad Barre.

Since then, the former British Somaliland has pushed for sovereignty on the grounds that it was separate for a few days after independence in 1960 until it joined the former Italian colony of Somalia to form the modern state.

The African Union and its predecessor body have generally preferred to keep nations within the colonial borders at independence to discourage a flood of separatist movements.

Somaliland has won some in the international community to its side, but is still struggling to gain critical mass. It refuses to have anything to do with the interim government in the rest of Somalia, which also claims Somaliland.

Meanwhile in Mogadishu, gunmen late on Friday fired rockets at a hotel housing delegates to a national reconciliation conference seen as the last good chance for the interim government to gain peace and boost its legitimacy.

No casualties were reported.

Insurgents from a militant Islamist movement the government drove out of the capital with Ethiopian help in late December have attacked the conference since its start on July 15, though none has directly hit the venue. (Additional reporting by Guled Mohamed in Mogadishu)