

Regional Somali authority bans lawmakers from carrying weapons

Agence France Presse

February 24, 2006

MOGADISHU

Authorities controlling the Somali town of Baidoa on Friday banned lawmakers from carrying weapons to the conflict-scarred southern outpost which will serve as the venue for the weekend parliamentary session, officials said.

Rahanwein Resistance Army (RRA) commander Aden Mohamed Saransor said his security men would confiscate weapons from any of the 275 lawmakers expected to attend the landmark meeting on Sunday in Baidoa, about 250 kilometres (155 miles) west of Mogadishu, the first parliamentary gathering on home soil.

"Neither ministers nor parliamentarians would be allowed to carry weapons. Let them trust us because proper security mechanisms are in place," said Saransor, who has been tasked by RRA chief Mohamed Ibrahim Habsade to oversee security.

"We have taken adequate security measures to make everybody safe. No need of carrying weapons. RRA security men manning checkpoint at the roads linking Baidoa to other towns are confiscating weapons in order to limit arms circulation," he added.

The RRA controls vast swathes of the Bay and Bakol regions in Somalia, a nation of up to 10 million people.

It was not clear whether the order also covers Somali transitional President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, Prime Minister Ali Mohammed Gedi and parliament speaker Sharif Hassan Sheikh Adan, all expected to arrive in Baidoa on Saturday.

About 130 MPs are already in Baidoa and some of those who have yet to arrive are warlords who have never travelled in Somalia without heavily-armed militiamen and are yet to comment on the order.

The quorum for a session in the 275-transitional federal assembly, which is expected to discuss the future of the country's splintered government, is 138 people present.

A deep rift over the seat of government between a faction led by Yusuf and Gedi and another led by Adan and the warlords who control Mogadishu has prevented the lawmakers from meeting since they left exile in Kenya last year.

Under heavy international pressure the two camps agreed to a compromise last month whereby the parliament will meet in Baidoa and iron out the disagreements that have scuppered the restoration of a functional authority.

In addition, they are expected to renew appeals for humanitarian aid for up to two million people threatened by a drought-induced famine in the country.

Somalia has been without a functioning central government for nearly 15 years and Yusuf's government is the latest in more than a dozen attempts to restore stability to a nation that has been wracked by warlord-fuelled violence since the 1991 ouster of strongman Mohamad Siad Barre.