



## Ex-Somali PM Ordered to Pay Plaintiffs in War Crimes Case

Peter Heinlein

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A U.S. court has ordered a former Somali prime minister to pay \$21 million to victims of torture and human rights abuses while he was in office.

A federal district court near Washington ruled that Mohamed Ali Samantar must pay damages to victims of torture and human rights abuses during the 1980s.

Samantar was a senior general under former Somali dictator Mohamed Siad Barre, who was overthrown in 1991. At different times, he served as vice president, defense minister and prime minister during the 21 years he ruled the Horn of Africa nation.



This Thursday, June 23, 2011 photo shows Aziz Deria in Washington.

The civil court judgment comes after an eight-year legal battle that at one point went to the U.S. Supreme Court. Samantar ended efforts to defend himself in the civil case and declared bankruptcy, making it unlikely that the seven plaintiffs in the case would receive any money.

One plaintiff, Abduaziz Deria of Bellevue, Washington said he was not concerned with money. He said the more important issue was justice for relatives who died in aerial bomb attacks on the northern city of Hargeisa in which human rights groups say more than 50,000 people were killed.

"The case was not about money. We know the guy doesn't have a lot of money," he said. "All we wanted from him was an apology and an acknowledgement. He has done a lot of harm to his people. He committed a crime against humanity."

Samantar is 76 years old and in failing health. He did not return telephone calls asking for comment. His attorney, Joseph Peter Drennan, said Samantar rejects the charges against him as politically motivated.

"Of course it was not about money. It was about politics," he said. "It was about trying to brand Samantar as a war criminal."

Drennan says his client strongly denies any wrongdoing, and only ended his defense because of financial hardship.

"The default [monetary judgment] that Samantar was essentially obliged to take because of a dearth of resources has been egregiously misinterpreted and misconstrued by advocates for this litigation," he said.

Kathy Roberts of the California-based Center for Justice and Accountability was the lead plaintiff's attorney in the case. She says the judgment against Samantar sets an important precedent for future cases that may be brought against accused war criminals seeking refuge in the United States.

"The court's ruling [sends] a message to victims and perpetrators alike that the U.S. will not provide a safe haven to war criminals," she said. "Individuals who are perpetrating Syria's human rights violations who may think they are acting with impunity should be aware that the arc of justice is long but it does come."

Defense attorney Drennan, however, says the court's judgment against Samantar sets a dangerous precedent. He maintains that such cases are inherently political, and have no place in an American courtroom.

"Given the instability in places like Syria and Yemen, among other places, it is entirely possible that those who advocate for this type of litigation will attempt to invoke this as a precedent. I don't think it would be a valid precedent because I think it is fundamentally a flawed decision," he said.

Drennan says the court's ruling is already being appealed on the grounds that Samantar was improperly denied immunity from prosecution.