

British and Malaysian men jailed in Somalia for terror offences

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British man Darren Anthony Byrnes was one of two foreigners to be sentenced to 15 years by a military court in Somalia for belonging to Islamist militant group al-Shabab. Byrnes (left in the photograph) and Malaysian Ahmad Mustakim bin Abdul Hamid (right in the photograph) were convicted of recruiting foreigners.

They are the first foreign extremists in Somalia to be convicted for al-Shabab membership, court officials said.

Prosecutors said Abdul Hamid and Byrnes came to Somalia to support al-Shabab and “destroy” and “shed blood.” Byrnes came to Somalia “to shed blood”, prosecutor Brig Gen Abdullahi Bule Kamay said in a video extract of the court proceedings released by the military. “If he is spreading Islam, why did he not do that in the UK?” he added. Kamay described the Malaysian as an “aggressor” who came to Somalia to “destroy.”

The prosecution said that Byrnes had converted to Islam in 2006. He then travelled to Mombasa, on Kenya’s coast, where he married a Somali woman. A lawyer for the two, Mohamed Warsame Mohamed, said the men denied being members of al-Shabab and claimed to have come to Somalia to visit relatives and friends.

Abdul Hamid and Byrnes admit they have been to areas controlled by al-Shabab, he said, but they deny becoming members of the militant group.

“In my opinion, relying on documents is insufficient to give

them a 15-year jail term," Mohamed told VOA Somali.

Abdul Hamid traveled from Yemen and entered the country in 2009. The court said he fought for al-Shabab in at least four clashes. He also allegedly offered the group first aid and health services.

Byrnes entered Somalia through Kenya in 2010 and allegedly worked with Bilal al-Berjawi, a known al-Shabab and al-Qaida operative from Britain who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2012 outside Mogadishu, according to court documents.

Byrnes had fought alongside al-Shabab in Mogadishu before the militants were dislodged from the capital in August 2011. At the time, Byrnes was also involved in an al-Shabab plot to attack France, the court said.

Authorities in Somalia's Puntland region arrested the men in April 2019 as they tried to leave for Yemen on a boat,

In a brief statement, the British embassy in Mogadishu said it was "providing consular assistance" to Byrnes "and are offering support to his family". It would not comment on what happened in court.