

# Minnesota concerts canceled for London-based Somali musician after visa delays

London-based Aar Maanta has performed twice here before without issue.

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A visa delay for a London-based musician who is Somali and Muslim has forced a group of Minnesota performing arts organizers to cancel a monthlong residency for him and his band, the Urban Nomads.

The visit by Aar Maanta and his band was part of Midnimo — the Somali word for unity. The program, launched in 2014, brings in world-renowned Somali artists for residencies and events to help increase the understanding of Somali culture through music.

Aar Maanta and his group were expected to begin their residency in Minnesota this week. All the band members but Aar Maanta received their visas, according to the Cedar Cultural Center in Minneapolis, which leads the consortium of performing arts presenters and universities. Aar Maanta was the only one placed under “Additional Administrative Processing.”

“It’s extremely disappointing for my band and me to lose weeks of work that we meticulously planned for months,” Aar Maanta said in a written statement. “I was shocked to be singled out and discriminated against by the Consulate, despite my influential work, clean record, integrity, and goodwill missions with international bodies like the U.N. It is heartbreaking to know that systematic discriminatory rules like the ‘Muslim ban’ put into practice in this day and age are affecting not only me but people in far more vulnerable situations.”

As an attorney on the case, Matthew Covey said he couldn’t comment on it. But as a New York attorney specializing in visas, he’s seen a significant uptick over the last six months in problems and scrutiny of artists coming from Muslim-majority countries. It’s difficult to know why, he said.

It could be that the State Department is understaffed and the system is overtaxed or it could be a reflection of the political leanings of a conservative State Department, Covey said. “There’s no way to judge,” he added.

But the delay in obtaining a visa for Aar Maanta is part of a broader trend, Covey said.

The Cedar has twice hosted Aar Maanta. His first residency in 2012 allowed some in the Minneapolis artistic and Somali communities to connect with live Somali music for the first time in decades, and in some cases, their lives. Aar Maanta led a songwriting and poetry workshop for youth and gave a public performance at the Cedar that drew a crowd of more than 250 people.

The success of that residency helped launch the Midnimo program.

In 2015, Aar Maanta returned for a two-week residency, which included workshops with youth, classroom visits, and pop-up concerts throughout the community. The sold-out final performance drew more than 700 people of all ages and cultures who danced side by side, according to the Cedar.

Fadumo Ibrahim, the Cedar’s program manager, said his organization previously has faced visa challenges bringing Somali artists to Minnesota, but it’s become “increasingly difficult” over the last year.

“This case is a concrete example of how travel restrictions and the travel ban limit artistic voices and freedom,” Ibrahim said. “Aar Maanta’s visit to Minnesota would have brought hope and positivity to the Somali and larger communities here at a time when we all really need it.”



Aar Maanta

Last year, the Midnimo program expanded to Mankato and St. Cloud, where the Somali population has grown quickly.

Aar Maanta's 2017 residency would have been the first time the artist visited areas outside the Twin Cities.

Jameel Haque, a professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato, had planned to host the group in his "History of Judaism, Christianity and Islam" class. He and the students spent two weeks preparing for Aar Maanta's visit.

Said Haque: "At the heart of it, the students and community members do not even understand why he isn't coming ... nor do I."