

UA 106/00

Fear of torture

5 May 2000

ETHIOPIA

Aberra Gobena, teacher
Abdissa Aberra, school student (son of the above)
Belachew Tadesse, teacher
Fita Kanaa, teacher
Hika Wolteji, teacher
Sileshi Ayana, teacher
Yonatan Dinagde, school student

Teachers from other towns in Oromia, including Tesfa Burayu (Nekemte secondary school director) and his wife (name not known), Tesfa Atomsa (deputy director of the school), Wolde-Yesus Mengesha, Marga Legesse and Kano Weyessa, and school students Million Belema, Rikitu Chemedda, Berhanu Fufa, Fisseha Negesse, Galana Neda, Adugna Tujo, Hachalu Zembaba and Duguma Galissa

The teachers and students named above were arrested after demonstrations against the Oromia regional government in western Ethiopia, where police have beaten and shot demonstrators. They are now held incommunicado, without charge. Amnesty International is concerned that they may have been arrested for the non-violent expression of their opinions and it fears they may be tortured or ill-treated.

They were arrested in the last two weeks of April in Nejo and other towns in Oromia region, west of the capital, Addis Ababa. They are among scores of teachers and school students detained in Oromia in the past two months.

The demonstrations expressed concern about the adequacy of government action against huge bush fires that have been raging in the Bale and Borena areas of Oromia since February. The government has organised fire-fighting and requested international assistance, and has prosecuted some farmers for starting the fires. Amnesty International is unable to assess the claim by the armed opposition Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) that the fires were started in order to drive out OLF fighters in the area.

The demonstrations and arrests started on 7 March after school students in Ambo town, 100km west of Addis Ababa, sent a deputation to the Oromia regional government, accusing them of inaction and asking to be sent to fight the fires. Their request was refused, and police beat the students when they protested, particularly at Ambo secondary school. The police reportedly shot dead a 19-year-old student, Getu Diribe Benti (m), and wounded many others. There are unconfirmed reports of other shooting deaths. Over 100 students were arrested and reportedly beaten and denied food in custody. Most were released after a few days, but some are still detained without charge, including Million Belema, Rikitu Chemedda, Berhanu Fufa, Fisseha Negesse, Galana Neda, Adugna Tujo, Hachalu Zembaba and Duguma Galissa (aged between 17 and 20 years).

There were further arrests and shootings by police on 2 April, when school students in Dembi Dollo demonstrated peacefully about the government's failure to tackle the bush fires and against the arrests and shootings at Ambo. At least one student, Diribe Jifara (f), was shot dead, and others were wounded. Several students and teachers were arrested and are still detained.

Arrests of demonstrators and others suspected of involvement in the protests are continuing.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Thousands of members of the Oromo ethnic group are currently detained in Ethiopia on suspicion of supporting the OLF, which has been fighting the government in the Oromo region (Oromia) since it left the government coalition in 1992. There have been numerous reports of torture of OLF suspects in recent years. The government is believed to suspect some connection between these demonstrations and the OLF.

These arrests of Oromo opponents of the government have come as Ethiopia is about to hold national and regional parliamentary elections on 14 May.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing concern at the recent incommunicado detention without charge or trial of school teachers in Nejo and teachers and school students in Ambo, Dembi Dollo, Nekemte and other towns in Oromia;
- requesting assurances that those arrested are not being tortured or ill-treated in custody, and calling for them to be allowed visits by their families, lawyers, and doctors;
- urging that they should be either charged with recognisable criminal offences and given prompt and fair trials, or released immediately and unconditionally if they are imprisoned solely on account of their peacefully-held opinions;
- calling for an independent and impartial investigation which would report publicly on the police use of deadly force in these incidents, particularly the killings of Getu Diriba Benti in Ambo and Diribe Jifara and possibly others in Dembi Dollo, and for any member of the security forces responsible for unlawful killing to be brought to justice.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency Meles Zenawi
Prime Minister, Prime Minister's Office, P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa,
Ethiopia

Telegrams: Prime Minister, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Faxes: + 2511 552020

Salutation: Your Excellency

Mr Werede-Wold Wolde, Minister of Justice, Ministry of Justice
P O Box 1370, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Telegrams: Justice Minister, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Faxes: + 2511 550278 / 550722

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

His Excellency President Negaso Gidada, Office of the President, P O Box
1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Faxes: + 2511 552020

Salutation: Your Excellency

Mr Kuma Demeksa, President of Oromia, Oromia Regional State Council, P O
Box 62297, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Salutation: Dear Sir

Mr Kinfe Gebre-Medhin, General Manager, Public Security
Office of the Prime Minister, P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Faxes: + 2511 552020

Salutation: Dear Sir

and to diplomatic representatives of Ethiopia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 15 June 2000.