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Ethiopia: Amnesty International's presentation to the European Parliament on Human Rights in Ethiopia*

This presentation focuses on a treason trial of prisoners of conscience arising from the Ethiopian elections a year ago. More details of the background and the general human rights situation in the country are contained in a report published by Amnesty International on 2 May 2006, "*Ethiopia – Prisoners of conscience on trial for treason: opposition party leaders, human rights defenders and journalists*", AI Index: AFR 25/023/2006 (also available at www.amnesty.org).

Today, in the early stage of the prosecution case and for the next several months, 76 people are on trial in Addis Ababa on charges which could carry the death penalty. They include leading members of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) party, as well as elected members of parliament, lawyers and academics.

Human rights defenders are among the accused, including Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, who is aged 76 and in poor health, founder of the only active human rights reporting organization in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council; Daniel Bekele, policy and advocacy manager of the Ethiopian office of ActionAid, the South Africa-based international development organization; Netsanet Demissie, director of the Organization for Social Justice in Ethiopia – both are human rights lawyers and working for the Global Campaign Against Poverty; and Kassahun Kebede, the Addis Ababa representative of the Ethiopian Teachers Association.

Fourteen journalists of the private press are also on trial, in this latest government attack on the freedom of the media. One of them, Serkalem Fasil, is seven months pregnant and complaining of lack of medical and pre-natal care.

They are all accused of organizing violent demonstrations against the government and ruling party over alleged electoral fraud. The CUD leaders deny this – though they are boycotting the trial as they do not consider it will be fair. They maintain that they organised peaceful protests and were not responsible for the violence which erupted, particularly when the security forces used live ammunition against demonstrators and killed dozens.

Amnesty International believes the CUD leaders, journalists and human rights defenders are prisoners of conscience who should not be facing charges carrying possible death sentences, such as treason, outrage against the constitution, inciting armed rebellion, and an absurd charge of "attempted genocide". Others on trial may also be prisoners of conscience.

Like the Ambassadors' Donor Group in Addis Ababa, which includes the European Commission, Amnesty International has called for the unconditional release of the opposition party leaders, human rights defenders and journalists. The government's claim that they will get a fair trial is doubtful in view of the history of unfair political trials under the current government. The European Union's appointment of an international trial observer is one important safeguard. The Donor Group has called for a political reconciliation between the government and opposition parties.

Amnesty International's call to the European Parliament

Amnesty International urges the European Parliament to do four things in response to these violations of human rights:

1. Work vigorously in all possible ways, including through their own contacts with the Ethiopian parliament and on visits to Ethiopia, to secure as soon as possible the release of these prisoners of conscience, as well as closely monitor their treatment in prison.
2. Support the right to freedom of opinion, expression and association in Ethiopia, including the right to demonstrate peacefully, the right to publish opinions freely through an independent press, and the right to engage in civil society activism.
3. Adopt a resolution on the human rights situation in Ethiopia, aimed particularly at protecting and supporting the Ethiopian human rights defenders on trial, in line with the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.
4. Call on the European Commission and the EU Council and its member states, to more actively investigate and report on human rights violations throughout the country, and bring these to the attention of the Ethiopian Government and the international community for remedy.

***Statement delivered to the Extraordinary Joint Committee Meeting of the Committee on Development, the Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament, held at Strasbourg on 15 May 2006, the anniversary of the May 2005 elections in Ethiopia, which were observed by the European Union Election Observation Mission. Statement presented by Dr Martin Hill, Amnesty International's Researcher on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.**

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