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Ethiopia: Two human rights defenders still in detention as verdict is adjourned again

The Federal High Court in Addis Ababa today adjourned to 24 December its delivery of the verdict on two civil society activists, Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie, who face possible life sentences on political charges. The verdict, which was expected on 22 November but was delayed to 30 November on account of the illness of one of the three judges, has been delayed again for four weeks while a substitute judge is appointed and given time to review the case.

Both men have already been held in prison for two years, as bail has continually been refused.

All other defendants on trial with them, including leaders of the opposition party Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), were freed in July through a negotiated "pardon" arrangement after they were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment or long prison terms. Only Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie remain before the court, as they had presented a defence -- unlike the others -- and declined to plead guilty and apply for a political pardon.

Amnesty International continues to appeal for their immediate and unconditional release as prisoners of conscience who were arrested and put on trial because of their peaceful human rights defence work. Both have been held in prison since November 2005 and face possible life sentences.

Amnesty International's trial observers were barred from the country in July. Amnesty International was seeking to assess whether the trial was being conducted in accordance with international standards of fair trial, about which it has serious concerns.

Daniel Bekele is the policy manager of ActionAid in Ethiopia. Netsanet Demissie is the founder and director of the Organization for Social Justice in Ethiopia. Both are prominent human rights lawyers who were arrested in November 2005 during mass round-ups amid political protests at alleged electoral fraud following the May 2005 elections. Government security forces shot dead 187 people during demonstrations in June and November 2005.