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Ethiopia: Two prisoners of conscience freed

Amnesty International today welcomed the release of human rights activists Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie, who had been detained in Ethiopia since November 2005, but said the two prisoners of conscience should be compensated for the time they spent in prison.

The two men were released today, having received a presidential pardon after they signed a letter “acknowledging mistakes” committed in relation to the 2005 elections. It is not yet clear if the pardon is unconditional.

“These two men did not commit any acts for which they need to seek pardon,” said Erwin van der Borcht, Director of Amnesty International’s Africa Programme.

“They were prisoners of conscience, detained and convicted solely for their peaceful work as human rights defenders. They should have their convictions unconditionally pardoned, and should receive compensation for the period they were unfairly imprisoned.”

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.

Both men chose to enter a defence, unlike other co-accused, during a trial that ran for over two years. In December 2007, they were convicted by a majority verdict of the Ethiopian Federal High Court of provoking and preparing “outrages against the Constitution” and were sentenced to 30 months imprisonment.

According to Amnesty International, the prosecution failed to present evidence that either Daniel Bekele or Netsanet Demissie incited violence and the judges convicted them on the basis of the testimonies of two witnesses whose credibility was doubtful and strongly contested by the defence. The Ethiopian government barred representatives from Amnesty International from observing the trial in July 2007.