

Public Statement

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Ethiopia and Eritrea: Cease-fire and human rights

Human rights issues have again come to the fore after a preliminary cease-fire in the two-year border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The recent heavy fighting since 12 May 2000 ended with a cease-fire deal brokered by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and signed in Algiers by both Ethiopia and Eritrea on 18 June 2000. The OAU peace plan provides for a UN peace-keeping force in a 25-kilometer-wide "temporary security zone" on the Eritrean side, the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces from Eritrea, and neutral border demarcation.

Amnesty International is urging both governments to make human rights protection a priority in the cease-fire situation and the continuing peace talks.

As the two governments and the international community respond to the consequences of the war, including massive displacement of civilians on both sides, as well as the drought and famine affecting the whole region, Amnesty International is appealing to the Governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea to ensure that their own practices fully conform to recognized principles of human rights and humanitarian law. It is calling on both governments to work towards remedying the human rights violations which have arisen during the conflict, including killings of civilians, arbitrary detentions and forced expulsions, and to prevent them from recurring.

Amnesty International, as a non-political and independent human rights organization, does not and cannot under its mandate take sides or positions on the war issues apart from those affecting human rights and humanitarian law. It is scrutinising complaints of violations of human rights and humanitarian law in the most recent fighting, where independent verification of violations alleged by each government against the other, and mostly strenuously denied by the other, is frequently lacking.

Whereas Ethiopia had earlier ratified the Geneva Conventions and has given the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to its Eritrean prisoners of war, Amnesty International is continuing to press the Government of Eritrea to ratify the Geneva Conventions and allow the ICRC immediate access to its Ethiopian prisoners of war. The Geneva Conventions will be the best guarantee of swift exchange of prisoners of war and release of civilian internees when the conflict ends.

In Eritrea, an immediate issue of human rights and humanitarian concern is the holding in newly-established camps of several thousand Ethiopian civilian residents in Eritrea in the past month. Those in these "internment" camps were reportedly restricted and prevented from leaving. At least 7,500 were said to be held, including some 2,000 in one camp alone at Sheketi near Asmara. The organization notes, however, that some 3,500 Ethiopians or more who were displaced by the fighting and placed in camps have now been allowed to return voluntarily from Eritrea to Ethiopia under the auspices of the ICRC.

Among those still held in these camps appear to be Ethiopian nationals detained on account of not having valid residence visas, and some reportedly suspected of having committed a security offence in connection with the Ethiopian attacks. The government has said that others were placed there “for their own protection” in view of attacks or threatened attacks on them by Eritrean civilians. These hastily-established camps were initially reported to be lacking in adequate basic facilities of water, health, shelter and food. Conditions have now improved and some international agencies have been allowed access to provide humanitarian assistance.

Amnesty International is calling for any Ethiopian civilians recently detained or interned in Eritrea solely on account of their nationality to be released as being prisoners of conscience and allowed to leave the camps. It has urged the Eritrean authorities to ensure that the camps are provided with basic necessities and family access allowed. Amnesty International is pressing for any Ethiopians detained on suspicion of having committed a security offence to be taken to court and charged with a recognizably criminal offence as soon as possible, and given a fair and prompt trial.

Killings and ill-treatment have also been alleged of a number of Ethiopian nationals in Eritrea, who were reportedly attacked by civilians when the new fighting started, on account of their suspected support for the Ethiopian military advance. Amnesty International is calling for independent investigations into these allegations and for the authorities in Eritrea to identify and bring to justice those responsible, and make a public commitment to guarantee the safety of Ethiopian nationals in Eritrea.

In Ethiopia, Amnesty International remains concerned that 1,200 Eritrean civilians are still detained or interned without charge or trial since June 1998 on account of the war situation and are held in harsh conditions in Dedessa camp in western Ethiopia.

An unknown number of other Eritreans are reportedly still detained in Shegole camp in Addis Ababa and in other places of detention in Addis Ababa and other towns since 1998 or 1999. They were detained without charge or trial on account of their Eritrean origin and were to be expelled to Eritrea. Amnesty International strongly criticised the mass expulsion to Eritrea in harsh conditions in 1998 and 1999 of as many as 70,000 Eritreans living in Ethiopia, who were stripped of Ethiopian citizenship. It called for expulsions to be suspended until the citizenship issue is properly resolved, although any who wish to depart voluntarily to Eritrea should be allowed to do so under ICRC auspices.

Amnesty International is appealing for the release without further delay of Eritrean civilians detained or interned in Ethiopia solely on account of their Eritrean origin, who are prisoners of conscience. It is requesting that they should be treated humanely and given access to their relatives. It is urging also that any Eritreans held on suspicion of having committed a security offence in relation to the war should as soon as possible be brought to court and charged with a recognizably criminal offence and given a fair and prompt trial.

Amnesty International believes that human rights must be firmly protected and violations remedied in order for a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea to be lasting and effective.

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