

Ethiopian journalists set free

Journalist and publisher Serkalem Fasil has been released from prison in Ethiopia after the judge ruled she had no case to answer. She has been set free along with her partner Eskinder Negga and 26 others - including six more journalists.

Serkalem Fasil was one of 14 editors and reporters of independent and privately-owned newspapers arrested for publishing articles criticising the government's actions during the May 2005 parliamentary elections.

She was seized by police in November 2005 for her role as co-publisher of Asqual, Menilik and Satenaw newspapers. Serkalem Fasil faced the death penalty if found guilty on charges of treason, outrages against the constitution and incitement to armed conspiracy. She was pregnant at the time of her arrest and gave birth to a baby son in the police hospital in June.

In March 2006, a delegation from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) visited Ethiopia and met Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who told them the journalists would receive fair trials. In October and November, lawyers of three of the defendants cross-examined prosecution witnesses (Serkalem Fasil refused to take part as she didn't believe the trial would be fair).

Now eight of the journalists have been set free, including Zekarias Tesfaye (Netsanet), Sisay Agena (Ethiop), Fasil Yenealem (Addis Zena), Dereje Habtewold (assistant editor of Menilik and Netsanet), Nardos Meaza (editor of Satenaw) and Feleke Tibebe (assistant editor of Hadar).

Freedom of expression has been seriously limited in Ethiopia since the arrests. Only a few independent newspapers continue to publish and they avoid strong criticism of the government. The release of Serkalem Fasil and others is a step in the right direction. Amnesty International now calls for all other Ethiopian prisoners of conscience to be set free.