

PUBLIC

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UA 261/05 Possible prisoners of conscience/ fear of torture or ill-treatment

ETHIOPIA Birkayehu Mekecha (m), official in the head office of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD)
Dache Molla (m), CUD representative in Kolla Dibba district in North Gondar
Emkulu Yiheyis (m), CUD youth official in Debre Sina town in Amhara Region
Endrias Ero (m), CUD representative in Gamo Goffa zone
Hailemichael Zijita (m), CUD parliamentary candidate in Gamo Goffa zone
Solomon Tenaye (m), CUD secretary in Minjar district in Amhara Region
Tefera Mengeste (m), CUD official in Eastern Hararghe district
Tefaye Tarekegne (m), CUD district secretary in South Gondar
Wendwossen Shiferraw (m), CUD election observer in Debre Sina town
Yohannes Abate (m), CUD zone chair in western Gojjam

Hundreds of other members of opposition parties

Hundreds of opposition party officials and members are being held incommunicado without charge in order to stop them attending nationwide demonstrations which had been planned for 2 October. Several of those detained, including Dache Molla, have reportedly been beaten in detention, and all the detainees are at risk of torture or ill-treatment. There has also been widespread intimidation and harassment of suspected opposition supporters, particularly youths. Amnesty International believes that those arrested may be prisoners of conscience, detained solely on account of their non-violent opinions.

The authorities began arresting members of the two opposition coalitions, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and the United Ethiopian Democratic Front (UEDF), in mid-September, following the announcement of the demonstrations planned for 2 October.

The CUD said up to 12 of its regional party offices had been shut down and officials detained. The Oromo National Congress (ONC), part of the UEDF coalition, made similar charges. In total, the CUD and the UEDF claim that over 850 people have been detained, mainly in the central Amhara and Oromia regions, and in the south.

The government has accused the opposition parties of "a violent conspiracy aimed at subverting the constitutional order", and refused permission for the demonstrations, claiming that the opposition parties were planning violence leading up to the demonstrations planned for 2 October in the capital, Addis Ababa, and other towns.

The CUD and UEDF have denied planning any violence. They state the demonstrations were intended to be peaceful and legal expressions of their criticisms of alleged fraud in the 15 May parliamentary elections. They are calling for a national unity government to be formed to hold fresh elections, which the government has rejected. The opposition parties said they postponed the demonstrations due to the imposition of conditions which they found unacceptable, such as the acceptance of the official election results.

In the past, opposition supporters detained under similar circumstances have been ill-treated in custody and detained for a prolonged period on false charges without trial.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There were widespread fears that if the 2 October demonstrations had gone ahead, harsh security force action against demonstrators would recur. On 8 June in Addis Ababa, soldiers from a special army unit shot dead at least 36 protesters who were demonstrating against alleged election fraud. Calls by the international community for an independent inquiry into the killings have been dismissed. Police and local militia also detained several thousand other opposition supporters throughout the country, as well as investigators of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council. Many detainees were ill-treated in custody, and held illegally and incommunicado for some weeks, before they were taken to court and released on bail. (See UA 154/05, AI Index: AFR 25/001/2005, 7 June 2005, and follow-ups) The government at the time made similar allegations that the opposition parties were engaged in a violent conspiracy, for which it produced no evidence and prosecuted no-one.

The official result of the 15 May parliamentary elections gave Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's ruling Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and its affiliated parties 373 seats. The opposition parties took 172 seats, about one-third of the total. The elections were re-run in 31 constituencies, though there were complaints of fraud and irregularities in over half of all constituencies. Previously there were only 12 opposition members of parliament. The government also took the nine regional assemblies, but the CUD won Addis Ababa City Council. The European Union election observers' preliminary report, which was severely critical of the way the elections were administered, was dismissed by the Prime Minister as "garbage". The opposition parties have not yet declared whether they will take up their seats in the new parliament which is due to be convened on 10 October.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing concern about the recent arrests of hundreds of opposition party officials and members;
- appealing for them to be taken before a court within 48 hours, as prescribed under Ethiopian law, and either charged or released;
- calling for them to be given immediate access to their families, legal counsel and medical care;
- expressing concern that CUD representative Dacha Molla has reportedly been beaten in detention, and requesting guarantees that none of the detainees shall be subjected to torture or ill-treatment;
- appealing for the immediate and unconditional release of those detainees who are prisoners of conscience, held solely for exercising their right to peacefully express their opinions.

APPEALS TO:

Prime Minister

His Excellency Meles Zenawi

Office of the Prime Minister, PO Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 1 552020/ 552030 (please keep trying)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Justice

Mr Harka Haroye

Ministry of Justice, PO Box 1370, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 1 517775/ 520874

Email: ministry-justice@telecom.net.et

Salutation: Dear Minister

Federal Commissioner of Police

Mr Workneh Gebeyehu

Ministry of Federal Affairs, PO Box 5068, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Salutation: Dear Commissioner

COPIES TO:

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Mr Seyoum Mesfin, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

PO Box 393, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 1 514300

Email: mfa.addis@telecom.net.et

and to diplomatic representatives of Ethiopia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 11 November 2005.