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ETHIOPIA: CURRENT HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS NEED TO BE TACKLED

While the Ethiopian government has been praised for prosecuting former government officials on human rights charges, this initiative will be undermined unless the authorities stop abuses by their own forces.

"The authorities should openly acknowledge and deal with violations going on now," Amnesty International said. "The important message of the ongoing trials into past violations is that the perpetrators will not get away with their crimes -- and that message also needs to be sent to the forces committing violations today."

The human rights organization is urging the outgoing Transitional Government -- and the new government to be formed after next month's elections -- to act firmly to end and prevent human rights violations.

In the run-up to those elections on 7 May Amnesty International is appealing to all parties participating -- although an opposition boycott seems likely -- to support the organization's human rights recommendations aimed at developing safeguards against new violations. It is asking election observers to watch for any abuses of human rights, report them and press for prompt remedies.

The human rights organization made its appeal as it published a 58-page report today on the human rights record of President Meles Zenawi's Transitional Government which assumed power in 1991.

The report reviews the first stages of the trial of former members of the military government (Dergue) which overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. Forty-eight people face the death penalty for genocide and crimes against humanity. Ex-President Mengistu Haile-Mariam, defeated in 1991 and living in exile in Zimbabwe, is being tried in absentia.

More than 1,700 other detainees, mostly held since 1991, have yet to be charged and it is expected that the trials could last for years. Amnesty International is concerned that the trials should be fair and that the courts should not hand down death sentences -- themselves a violation of human rights.

The reports also highlights violations committed under the Transitional Government. Thousands of government opponents were detained without charge or trial between 1992 and 1994, mostly in the context of the ongoing conflict with the Oromo Liberation Front. While the majority have now been released, several hundreds remain in political detention.

Some of the detainees are prisoners of conscience who have been jailed for the expression of their political opinions, including journalists and members of non-violent opposition parties. Political prisoners are more often being taken to court now but Amnesty International is concerned at the failure of some trials to meet international standards of fairness.

Dozens of government opponents have "disappeared", some apparently ending up in secret detention centres. Detainees suspected of belonging to opposition groups have told Amnesty International about being tortured.

In addition a number of defenceless civilians have been shot dead by the security forces and abuses have also been committed by certain armed opposition groups.

In February 1995, an Amnesty International delegation visited Ethiopia to discuss its concerns with the government. Ethiopian officials rejected many of the organization's criticisms and claimed its research was politically-biased. Testimonies of torture and cases of "disappearances" were "mostly fabricated", they alleged.

"We have listened to their replies and reviewed the evidence but we reject charges of bias and remain convinced that human rights violations are continuing in Ethiopia," Amnesty International said. "The serious concerns we identify in this report need to be considered on their own merits."

Among other recommendations, the organization is calling for impartial inquiries into alleged "disappearances", torture and political killings by the Ethiopian security forces.

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