

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: AFR 25/022/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 174
11 September 2007

Ethiopia: Call for a Millennium for Human Rights

As Ethiopia celebrates a new Millennium on 12 September 2007 according to the country's officially-used Julian calendar, Amnesty International calls on the Ethiopian government to mark the Millennium with a special declaration of commitment to protection of human rights.

In the year 2000 when the rest of the world celebrated the new Millennium according to the international Gregorian calendar, world leaders at the United Nations adopted the Millennium Declaration to reduce poverty. They also stated, "*We will spare no effort to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law, as well as respect for all internationally recognized human rights.*"

For the Ethiopian Millennium, concerts and parties are being held over the coming year to celebrate Ethiopia's rich cultural heritage. Events are being organized by the government, civil society and the Ethiopian diaspora in many countries throughout the world. The development initiatives, such as tree-planting, and fundraising for schools and clinics, match UN Millennium Development Goals.

Respect for human rights should also have a place in Ethiopia's Millennium objectives.

Prisoners of conscience: Two human rights defenders arrested in November 2005 and on trial for political offences carrying possible death sentences will be judged on 8 October - Daniel Bekele of ActionAid and Netsanet Demissie of the Organization for Social Justice in Ethiopia. All other defendants in this and another related trial, including opposition party leaders and journalists considered by Amnesty International to be prisoners of conscience, were convicted, sentenced to life imprisonment or other prison terms, then swiftly pardoned in July-August 2007, after signing a negotiated pardon request. Amnesty International has welcomed their release, while reserving final analysis about the fairness of the trials. Three Ethiopian Teachers Association officials, who are torture survivors considered by Amnesty International to be prisoners of conscience, have been in detention since May-June 2007 and have not been formally charged to date. Amnesty International calls for the immediate release of these and all other prisoners of conscience.

Torture: Amnesty International is deeply concerned about reports of torture of opposition party activists arrested in December 2006, most of whom are still in custody. The government should order impartial and independent investigations into these and other allegations of torture and take all necessary steps to prevent torture of prisoners.

Death Penalty: On 6 August 2007 an execution took place -- the second execution since the present government came to power in 1991. On a positive note, the President commuted 10 death sentences in a New Year's amnesty in September 2006. However, Amnesty International was concerned that the prosecution in the above-mentioned political trial demanded the death penalty for all defendants -- though it was not imposed by the court. Members of the pre-1991 Dergue government who were convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity in June, including former President Mengistu Hailemariam in his absence in Zimbabwe, were not sentenced to death, but to life imprisonment -- although the prosecution has appealed to the Supreme Court for the death penalty to be imposed instead. Several death sentences for homicide and politically-related violent crimes await the results of judicial appeals or applications for clemency. Amnesty International opposes the death penalty as a violation of human rights and calls for it to be abolished in Ethiopia and worldwide.

The Somali Region: Amnesty International is deeply concerned about reports of grave violations of human rights and a humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia's Somali Region in the southeast, also known as the Ogaden. This is a result of the government's military operations against the armed opposition Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), following the ONLF's attack on a Chinese oil installation in Abole on 24

April 2007. Amnesty International condemned the ONLF's killing of some 65 Ethiopian civilians and seven Chinese civilians in this incident. Amnesty International calls now on the government for a full lifting of its blockage on humanitarian aid and movement of food supplies to the conflict-affected parts, and an end to extrajudicial executions.

A Millennium Appeal

Amnesty International appeals to the Government of Ethiopia to take the opportunity of this Millennium to affirm commitment to human rights, and to uphold its obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law. Amnesty International calls on the government to release all prisoners of conscience, publicly declare a strict prohibition of the use of torture, abolish the death penalty and lift blockage of humanitarian aid to the Somali Region.

Amnesty International is inviting support from Ethiopians in all sectors of society for opening up a new era for human rights in Ethiopia to mark the Millennium.