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Ethiopia: Threats against journalist are another attack on freedom of expression

Amnesty International condemns threats made by the Ethiopian authorities against Eskinder Nega, a journalist and former Amnesty International Prisoner of Conscience. Eskinder has been issued a warning to cease writing articles that the government considers to be inflammatory, or face imprisonment. Amnesty International is seriously concerned that Eskinder Nega is at risk of detention or of physical harm.

Eskinder was detained by heavily armed Federal Police officers on 11th February after leaving an internet cafe in central Addis Ababa. He was taken to the head office of the Federal police, where the Deputy Commissioner told Eskinder that he had been summoned for attempting to incite protests similar to those in Egypt or Tunisia.

The Deputy Commissioner particularly referred to an article Eskinder had posted on a website a week previously, which praised a statement made by the Egyptian army during the recent protests in Egypt that the armed forces would not resort to use of force against its people. The article urged that if protests did break out in Ethiopia, the army should acknowledge Ethiopians' right to peacefully demonstrate, and should protect them. The article concluded with the final appeal to the Ethiopian generals, "Don't fight your conscience."

The Deputy Commissioner stated that this article was attempting to undermine the army, and warned Eskinder that if any protests took place they would hold him responsible. Eskinder was further warned that the federal police had enough to convict him, and that he had "already crossed the boundary."

Information about recent events in Egypt and Tunisia has been tightly controlled in Ethiopia. Last time large scale public demonstrations took place in Ethiopia – following post-election protests in 2005 – security forces killed almost 200 demonstrators, and injured hundreds of others.

Eskinder has recently experienced a number of incidents which have led him to believe he is risk of physical harm. He also reports that he is under constant surveillance.

The use of threats of prosecution as leverage to 'negotiate' silence of journalists stifles dissent and violates freedom of expression. The right to freedom of expression is guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, both of which Ethiopia is a state party to. The Ethiopian Constitution also guarantees freedom of the press and the mass media and prohibits censorship in any form. Article 29(4) of the Constitution states "The press shall be granted institutional independence and legal protection to enable it to accommodate different opinions and ensure the free flow of information, ideas and opinions that are necessary in a democratic society."

Furthermore in 2010 Ethiopia agreed to the recommendation from the UN Human Rights Council's periodic review that it would "adopt all necessary measures to provide for free and independent media which reflect a plurality of opinions."

Eskinder Nega was threatened for exercising his right to freedom of expression. He has long been targeted for exercising this right in criticising abuses of civil and political rights in the country in his journalistic activities. Eskinder and countless other journalists have been imprisoned since the ruling party came to power nearly 20 years ago. The majority of the independent press was closed in a crackdown triggered by months of public protests in the wake of the 2005 parliamentary election results. Many journalists and owners of publishing houses, including Eskinder and his wife Serkalem Fasil, were imprisoned and convicted on charges relating to treason, but released by a Presidential pardon. Eskinder has been denied a licence to practice journalism since that time.

The free press has barely functioned in Ethiopia since those events. Most media in the country is state controlled. Many of those journalists who have been allowed to work since 2005 self-censor their output. Numerous journalists and editors have fled the country in recent years under the threat of prosecution and imprisonment.

The right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds – as provided for in the ICCPR - is essential to the building and maintenance of a society that respects human rights. The Ethiopian government's rhetoric on its commitment to upholding human rights needs to now be reflected in the way it treats civil society in the country – including those who make legitimate criticism of the government.

The authorities must stop using criminal proceedings or the threat of such, to silence their critics, and end other forms of harassment of journalists and members of civil society including human rights activists. Instead, the Ethiopian government should fulfil its international and domestic obligations by taking all necessary steps to ensure that journalists and human rights defenders can operate freely, independently and with the full protection of the state.