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Ethiopia: Prisoners of conscience prepare to face 'trial'

As international concerns regarding the human rights situation in Ethiopia escalate, Amnesty International called for the immediate and unconditional release of opposition leaders, human rights defenders and journalists who will face trial tomorrow on charges that include treason, violent conspiracy and "genocide".

"These people are prisoners of conscience, imprisoned solely on account of their non-violent opinions and activities," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme. "It is unacceptable that they are now facing serious criminal charges that could lead to death sentences and possible execution."

"We demand their immediate and unconditional release and a halt to this attempt by the Ethiopian government to criminalize freedom of expression and prevent legitimate political and human rights activity."

The group of over 80 defendants, which includes ten newly-elected members of parliament and other officials of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) party, is due to appear before the Federal High Court in Addis Ababa tomorrow.

The CUD members and journalists are refusing to plead to the charges or mount a defence, on the grounds that they do not expect a fair trial. The court is expected to enter a plea of not guilty on their behalf.

Charges filed against them include: high treason, "outrages against the Constitution", inciting and organizing armed uprising, and endangering the integrity of the state. Most are also charged with "genocide".

Among the CUD defendants are Berhanu Negga, a professor of economics, and Yacob Hailemariam, a former prosecutor in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and a former UN Special Envoy.

The group also includes four human rights defenders and 14 independent journalists. Others in the full list of 131 defendants may be tried in their absence, such as five journalists of original Ethiopian nationality who live in the United States and work for the Voice of America radio station.

"We fear the defendants may not be tried in accordance with internationally-recognized standards of fair trial before impartial and independent judges," said Kolawole Olaniyan. "Furthermore, the grounds advanced by the prosecution for the charge of 'genocide' do not even remotely match

internationally-recognized definitions of genocide -- or the definition set out in the Ethiopian Criminal Code. This absurd charge should be withdrawn immediately."

The prosecution grounds for the genocide charge include allegations of causing fear and harm to an ethnic group, and harming members of the Tigrayan-led ruling party by excluding them from social events and funerals.

Most of the defendants are currently held in Kaliti prison on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, with restricted access to their families. In late November, several CUD leaders went on a hunger strike for several weeks in protest at their detentions. Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, who had been very ill before his arrest in November, commenced a second hunger strike on 8 February and is reportedly becoming very weak. Amnesty International expressed concern about the health of the defendants in prison, and called on the Ethiopian authorities to provide them with any required medical treatment immediately.

Background

Prominent human rights defender Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, aged 75, is among the accused - a founder and former chair of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, and a current member of the CUD. Other human rights defenders on trial are civil society activists Daniel Bekelle, a lawyer and policy manager of the ActionAid office in Ethiopia, and Netsanet Demissie, an environmental and human rights lawyer, chair of the Organization for Social Justice in Ethiopia. Both had been involved in Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) activities in Ethiopia, but the authorities refused to allow them to hold a public rally. Kassahun Kebede, an official of the Ethiopian Teachers Association, is also on trial.

The defendants are among several thousand suspected government opponents from the CUD and other opposition parties who were detained as a result of anti-government demonstrations in November 2005 in Addis Ababa and other towns. The CUD had called for non-violent protests against alleged fraud in the parliamentary elections of 15 May 2005, in which European Union and other observers expressed concern at serious irregularities.

In January, the British government cut off US\$88 million equivalent budget support to Ethiopia due to concerns about governance and human rights issues arising from the disputed elections, and other international donors have taken similar measures. On a visit to Ethiopia on 16-17 February, the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid met CUD leaders in prison, and called for a political dialogue between the government and opposition, and for the prisoners to be released on bail.

Dozens more CUD members have been arrested in the past few days and accused of being members of a "clandestine group linked to the CUD" that police claimed had planned armed attacks on 18-19 February, which had been prevented. CUD lawyer Berhane Moges and Ethiopian Review website reporter Frezer Negash (f), arrested late January, were among 15 people taken to court on 21 February and remanded in custody.

Public Document

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