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Ethiopia: Treason trial of prisoners of conscience opens in Addis Ababa

Amnesty International today called on the Ethiopian government to release immediately and unconditionally several opposition Members of Parliament-elect, human rights defenders and journalists whose treason trial begins today, saying that they are "prisoners of conscience who have not used or advocated violence."

The organization issued a report, *Ethiopia: Prisoners of conscience on trial for treason*, providing a preliminary analysis of the trial, charges and defendants -- who include several lawyers and academics and a former UN Special Envoy. The report includes a list of concerns about whether they will receive a fair trial, and recommendations to the Ethiopian government and the international community.

"This very worrying trial has major implications for human rights, media freedom and democratization in Ethiopia," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme. "It will be a crucial test of the independence and impartiality of the Ethiopian judiciary."

In total, 76 individuals are due to appear in court today for the opening of the prosecution case, following earlier preliminary proceedings. They include Hailu Shawel and other leaders of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) party; Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, founder of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, aged 76 and in poor health after a hunger strike; Yakob Hailemariam, a former UN Special Envoy and Rwanda genocide prosecutor; civil society activists from ActionAid, Organization for Social Justice in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Teachers Association; and 14 journalists from independent newspapers.

They are charged, in different groups, with treason, "outrages against the Constitution", armed conspiracy, or "genocide" -- a charge Amnesty International has described in this context as "absurd". Nearly all the charges can carry death sentences.

All except three are refusing to participate in the trial or present a defence on the grounds that they do not expect to receive a fair trial. The three civil society activists have pleaded "not guilty" and have defence lawyers.

The defendants were arrested in November 2005 in connection with opposition demonstrations against the government, following opposition party protests at alleged electoral fraud in the 15 May elections.

Ethiopian security forces shot dead over 80 demonstrators in June and November 2005 and detained thousands of CUD supporters, many of whom are still detained without being taken to court and charged.

The trial is likely to last several months, and will be observed by a European Union trial observer.

The European Union Election Observation Mission expressed serious concerns about the fairness of the elections in both an interim report published in August 2005 and a final report published in March 2006. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi called the interim report "garbage" and has not so far responded to the final report. Other criticisms by donor governments were met with denials by the government.

Last week Ethiopia's main donors renewed calls for the release of the detained opposition leaders and representatives of the media and civil society. The Ambassadors' Donors Group said that all election leaders should be given a chance to take part in the political reconciliation process. In January, the British government cut off direct budget support to the Ethiopian government amounting to \$88 million, due to concerns about governance and human rights violations arising from the disputed elections.

Amnesty International urged the international community to increase their efforts to work impartially and effectively for human rights in Ethiopia, in accordance with human rights policy commitments by governments, aid donors and inter-governmental organizations such as the UN, African Union and European Union.

"Opposition parties, human rights defenders and journalists should be free to carry out their legitimate activities without fear of arbitrary detention, lengthy and possibly unfair trials on political charges, or other human rights violations," said Kolawole Olaniyan.

For a copy of the report *Ethiopia: Prisoners of conscience on trial for treason*, see <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf250132006>

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