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Ethiopian: Prisoners of conscience jailed for life

Amnesty International today expressed dismay at the life sentences handed down to 30 Ethiopian opposition party leaders, journalists and one of the country's most prominent human rights defenders.

The 30 were also stripped of their right to stand for election or vote.

"On the basis of the information we have, most -- if not all -- of those sentenced today are prisoners of conscience imprisoned on account of their opinions, who have not used or advocated violence and should therefore be immediately and unconditionally released," said Erwin van der Borght, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

Five exiles being tried in their absence were also sentenced to life. Eight others were sentenced to terms in prison ranging from one to 18 years, following the 14-month-long political trial. All have the right to appeal to the Supreme Court and subsequently for presidential pardon.

Some weeks ago they had reportedly signed an undisclosed statement that was expected to lead imminently to a pardon and political reconciliation with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's ruling party, although the government has not confirmed this.

The trial continues on 25 July for ten others who are presenting a defence, including two civil society activists.

AI regrets that its representatives were not issued with visas they had applied for to enable the organization to observe today's hearing, but still hopes to observe the upcoming defence case. The Ethiopian Prime Minister had said the trial was open to observers, and an Amnesty International representative had observed part of the trial on two previous occasions.

While Amnesty International reserves its assessment on the fairness of the trial until it is completed and the organization has fuller details of the proceedings, the organization is concerned that some aspects of the trial may not have met recognized international standards of fair trial.

Note to editor:

Amongst those sentenced to life in prison today is the prominent human rights defender Mesfin Woldemariam, a retired professor aged 76, who suffers from a worsening and painful spinal complaint.

For a fuller outline of Amnesty International's concerns about the case and its background, please see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf250162007>

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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