

PUBLIC

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Medical concern/ Prisoner of Conscience

ETHIOPIA

Professor Mesfin Woldemariam (m), aged 76, founder and former Chair of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council

Prisoner of conscience Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, aged 76, is receiving treatment in Addis Ababa's Police Hospital after collapsing in his prison cell on 18 August. He is reportedly suffering with pneumonia, which is likely to have been caused by the harsh conditions in which he has been held. Amnesty International is concerned that he may be returned to Kaliti Prison in Addis Ababa without receiving all the medical treatment that he needs.

Retired geography professor Mesfin Woldemariam, Ethiopia's most prominent human rights defender, has been detained since 1 November 2005, and is among 76 opposition party leaders, journalists and human rights defenders on trial on charges of "outrage against the Constitution", "obstruction of the exercise of constitutional powers", "inciting, organizing or leading armed rebellion" and "attempted genocide," in connection to the demonstrations against alleged fraud in the May 2005 elections in Ethiopia (see UA 284/05, AFR 25/017/2005, 02 November 2005, and follow-ups). He is said to be "responding well to treatment" for pneumonia in hospital, but his condition still remains serious and potentially life-threatening.

He has been in poor health for some time and prior to his arrest had been confined to bed for two months with back and leg problems, for which he has reportedly received no medical treatment at Kaliti Prison. He carried out two hunger strikes in December 2005 and January 2006 in protest at his detention and trial.

In Kaliti prison, Professor Mesfin Woldemariam has been held in a zinc-walled cell with other prisoners. In the current rainy season in Ethiopia, the cell is cold and damp. Hygiene, sanitary and toilet facilities are very poor. There are rats, cockroaches and fleas in the cell. Prisoners are allowed weekend visits in a large group, and can receive food, books and other items from their families, but are not allowed private family visits, writing materials or correspondence. They are provided with medical treatment as needed, either in prison or in hospital, but there have sometimes been delays and other deficiencies. Diplomats and delegates or visitors from abroad are sometimes allowed access, but often refused.

Amnesty International believes that the harsh prison conditions and Professor Mesfin Woldemariam's previous poor health have contributed in large measure to his current bout of pneumonia. Some other prisoners who have also needed hospital treatment after being detained in these conditions, including opposition party leader Dr Berhanu Negga (see UA 195/06, AFR 25/020/2006, 14 July 2006, and follow-ups), have previously been returned to Kaliti prison before medical tests were completed and against the advice of doctors, leading to a deterioration in their health. It is feared that if Professor Mesfin Woldemariam is returned to Kaliti prison in similar circumstances, his current and pre-existing medical complaints, combined with his age and the conditions in which he is held, could have grave consequences for his health.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Professor Mesfin Woldemariam founded the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), a non-governmental organization, in 1991. He was its chair until 2005 when he resigned and joined the election campaign as an advisor of the Rainbow Party which is part of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), the main opposition party. The government has been consistently hostile to the EHRCO, which is the only human rights group (eventually officially registered) investigating, documenting and reporting on human rights violations through its central and regional offices.

Several thousand suspected government opponents from the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and other opposition parties were detained following demonstrations in June and November 2005 in Addis Ababa and other towns. They were protesting against alleged fraud in the parliamentary elections of 15 May 2005. During the demonstrations, the security forces shot dead at least 86 people and allegedly many more, wounded over 200 others, and seven police were killed by mobs. A parliamentary inquiry is currently investigating the killings at the demonstration. CUD leaders who were elected to parliament and the Addis Ababa City Council refused to take up their positions. In December 2005, they were charged with instigating the violence. All defendants except three civil society activists refused to defend themselves, on the grounds that they did not expect to receive a fair trial. In early August the trial was adjourned until 4 October due to the annual court recess. Until then, defendants will have no opportunity to bring complaints about their treatment before the court.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing concern that Professor Mesfin Woldemariam has fallen seriously ill in prison and is now in hospital, reportedly with pneumonia;
- expressing concern that this is likely to have been caused by the harsh conditions in which he has been held at Kaliti prison;
- calling for guarantees that he will receive all necessary medical treatment and tests in hospital for pneumonia and his other medical complaints, for as long as doctors at the hospital deem it necessary and until he has fully recovered;
- calling also for his release on medical grounds, and that he not be returned to the same harsh prison conditions which led to his recent life-threatening illness;
- renewing calls for the authorities to release Professor Mesfin Woldemariam unconditionally, as Amnesty International believes him to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for exercising his right to freedom of opinion;
- calling on the authorities to respect regional and international standards for the treatment of prisoners, such as the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

APPEALS TO:

Prime Minister

His Excellency Meles Zenawi, Office of the Prime Minister, PO Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 11 1552020 / 1552030 (please keep trying)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Justice

Mr Assefa Kesito, Ministry of Justice, PO Box 1370, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 11 5517775 / 5520874

Email: ministry-justice@telecom.net.et

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

President

Girma Wolde-Giorgis, Office of the President, PO Box 1031/ PO Box 23698, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 11 5518656

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Mr Seyoum Mesfin, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PO Box 393, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 11 5514300

Email: mfa.addis@telecom.net.et

and to diplomatic representatives of Ethiopia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 4 October 2006.