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ETHIOPIA:
AUTHORITIES MUST ACT NOW TO AVOID
"HUMAN RIGHTS DISASTER"

Amnesty International said today that the former opposition forces now in power in Ethiopia and the future transitional government must act urgently to avoid another of the "human rights disasters" that have wracked the country for most of the past two decades.

"The country is now at a critical crossroads where there is a new chance for human rights," the worldwide human rights organization said. "If the brutal repression of the past 17 years is to truly end, human rights must be a top priority both in the present turmoil and in the future."

Amnesty International said the recent flight into exile of former President Mengistu Haile-Mariam and the defeat of his government by opposition forces this week are not enough to ensure that gross human rights violations are never repeated -- there need to be fundamental changes in the laws and practices in the country.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1974 revolution, many former government members were summarily executed and thousands more died in the years that followed. Throughout the 1980s political opponents continued to be secretly detained, "disappeared", tortured and killed.

"Those now in control of the country must make sure that pattern of repression is not repeated," Amnesty International said.

Even the minimum protections against torture, arbitrary arrest and detention in the 1987 constitution were largely ignored and releases of political prisoners over the years did not mean an end to political imprisonment.

"This relentless repression has amounted to a major human rights disaster, in a country also devastated by war and famine," Amnesty International said.

The organization today released a new report that chronicles the past two decades of gross violations, when tens of thousands of people "disappeared" and thousands of unarmed people were killed in reprisals after military defeats. Thousands of others, possibly as many as 100,000 in all, were imprisoned for political reasons and tortured, with some held for more than a decade in a prison known as the "End of the World".

The organization urged the new Ethiopian authorities and the future transitional government to adopt an eight-point human rights agenda that includes outlawing secret detention, guaranteeing fair trials, ending the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience, stopping torture and political killings and investigating past violations.

The organization said there was a pattern of arbitrary arrests of Eritreans, Tigrayans and Oromos suspected of involvement with the armed opposition groups -- which continued right up until the end of the Mengistu government.

Arrests were so frequent in the past that the jails in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, were invariably full -- Amnesty International's information is that at least 1,000 political prisoners were held there at any given time. A former political prisoner told Amnesty International recently that for Eritreans in Addis Ababa, being picked up by the security police and tortured was "as normal as vaccination".

Some of the hundreds arrested in Tigray had been held without trial for 12 years and some 120 were still detained until only a week or so ago. Many of those were released two days after President Mengistu fled the country into exile, but some are feared to have been killed at the end. A dozen Oromo prisoners of conscience detained without trial for 11 years or more and some 130 senior military officers detained after an attempted coup in 1989 were freed at the same time.

Prisoners have often been held in extremely harsh conditions in secret detention centres or official prisons -- in an Addis Ababa security detention centre 30 or more prisoners shared cells as small as four by four metres.

For most political prisoners, torture was to be expected, especially in the Maikelawi security detention centre in Addis Ababa -- known also as the

Third Police Station. Prisoners have been beaten, whipped, hung upside down, sexually tortured, threatened with mock execution or nearly drowned in barrels of filthy water. Beatings on the soles of the feet were so common that some victims dismissed it as not being "real torture".

But as thousands languished in prisons, thousands more "disappeared" from the streets or from their jail cells, Amnesty International said.

Strong circumstantial evidence suggests that the "disappeared" were killed either by the security officers or after special security committees passed secret death sentences. In those cases, people are believed to have been secretly murdered.

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