

EXTERNAL

AI Index: AFR 25/17/97

UA 330/97 Fear for safety / Prisoners of conscience

23 October 1997

ETHIOPIA Solomon Namara, journalist
Tesfaye Deressa, journalist

Two journalists are being held in incommunicado detention in Addis Ababa. There are fears for their safety, as some journalists in the past have been ill-treated or have "disappeared".

Solomon Namara and Tesfaye Deressa were arrested by government security officers at their newspaper office in Addis Ababa on 16 October 1997. They are acting editor-in-chief and deputy editor-in-chief respectively of *Urji* newspaper. They have not so far been taken to court or charged with any offence, although the Ethiopian constitution and laws require that anyone arrested is taken to court within 48 hours.

The reason for their arrests is understood to be a recent article critical of the government which was published in *Urji*, an Amharic-language newspaper (with an English-language edition too) serving particularly the Oromo community. The two men, who are both Oromos, have been arrested on previous occasions.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Urji has published many articles critical of the government and has a regular column reporting human rights violations committed by government forces, including arbitrary detentions, torture and "disappearances" of members of the Oromo ethnic group or "nationality". The victims were generally accused of supporting the armed opposition Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

The Ethiopian authorities have regularly used the Press Law (1992) to detain journalists for lengthy periods, and sometimes eventually bring them to trial, for allegedly publishing false information or inciting people against the government. Since 1992 there have probably been over 150 arrests of journalists on account of published articles and most private press journalists have been arrested at one time or another, some of them several times. They were virtually all prisoners of conscience. The president of the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association fled the country in early 1997. Currently about seven journalists are serving prison sentences of between one and two years and at least six are detained without having been charged with any offence. Two have been "disappeared" since 1994.

Reports have been received of a recent wave of arrests in Addis Ababa of scores of Oromo intellectuals suspected of sympathising with the OLF and opposing the pro-government Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO).

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing concern at the arrests of Solomon Namara and Tesfaye Deressa on account of a published newspaper article;
- urging that they be protected from any form of ill-treatment, that they be allowed immediate access to their families and legal representatives, and that they do not continue to be detained illegally;
- appealing for their immediate and unconditional release as prisoners of conscience imprisoned for exercising their internationally-recognised right to freedom of opinion and expression.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency Meles Zenawi
Prime Minister
Prime Minister's Office
P O Box 1031
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Faxes: +2511 552030
Telegrams: Prime Minister, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Salutation: Your Excellency

Mr Werede Wolde-Michael
Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
P O Box 1370
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Faxes: +2511 550722
Telegrams: Justice Minister, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Salutation: Dear Minister

Colonel Legesse Tegegne
Commissioner of Police
Ministry of Justice
P O Box 1370
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia
Faxes: +2511 550722
Telegrams: Police Commissioner, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Salutation: Dear Colonel

COPIES TO:

- Mr Kemal Bedri, Chief Justice, Supreme Court, P O Box 6166, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, **Fax: +2511 550278**
- Mr Seyoum Mesfin, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, P O Box 393, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, **Fax: +2511 514300**
- Mr Wolde-Michael Chemmu, Minister of Information, Ministry of Information, P O Box 1364, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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 6 December 1997.