

UA 299/07

Prisoners of conscience

ETHIOPIA	Daniel Bekele (m), policy manager of the Ethiopian office of ActionAid (international development NGO), lawyer Netsanet Demissie (m), director of NGO Organization for Social Justice in Ethiopia
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Human rights defenders Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie face possible sentences of life imprisonment on 22 November. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience, detained solely for their peaceful human rights activism.

On 22 November, the Ethiopian Federal High Court is due to hand down a judgement in the long-running trial of Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie on charges of committing "outrages against the Constitution". Both have been held in detention since November 2005 and are the two remaining defendants in a high-profile trial of human rights defenders, opposition leaders and journalists, where all the other defendants have already been released. Some were acquitted in April 2007. Others were sentenced to prison terms in July, but were swiftly pardoned as part of a negotiated agreement with the government.

Daniel Bekele is the policy manager of ActionAid in Ethiopia, and Netsanet Demissie is the founder and director of the Organization for Social Justice in Ethiopia. They were arrested in November 2005 during a period of mass arrests of those suspected of supporting the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) (see UA 284/05, AFR 25/017/2005, 2 November 2005, and follow-ups).

Both Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie denied any connection to the CUD, presented their defence and declined to plead guilty and apply for pardon. As a result, they potentially face life sentences. Amnesty International has been examining the fairness of the whole trial, and is deeply concerned that its observers were barred in July 2007. The Prime Minister had earlier said the trial would be open to international observers.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The arrest and detention of Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie took place during major political unrest after the May 2005 elections. Opposition demonstrations in Addis Ababa in June and November 2005 protesting at alleged election fraud were violently dispersed and security forces shot dead 187 people. Six police officers were also killed, and there was considerable damage to property in the city.

In the aftermath of the demonstrations, tens of thousands of opposition CUD party members were detained without charge or trial; some for several months. In December 2005, 131 CUD leaders and officials, journalists and human rights defenders were placed on trial (several in their absence) for political offences punishable by death or life imprisonment. Twenty-eight defendants were freed in April 2007 when the judges ruled that they had no case to answer. In July 2007, 38 of the other defendants, who had refused to present a defence, were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment or long prison terms. On 20 July, these 38 were pardoned and released with the agreement of the Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, after they signed a letter apologizing for "mistakes" in the demonstrations. Other similar guilty pleas and pardons followed, leaving only Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie currently remaining in prison after concluding their defence.

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

- expressing concern that Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie may be facing life imprisonment solely for their peaceful actions as human rights defenders;
- stating that Amnesty International believes them to be prisoners of conscience;
- calling on the Ethiopian authorities to release them immediately.

**APPEALS TO:**

Prime Minister

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

**Fax: +251 11 1552020****Salutation: Your Excellency**

Minister of Justice

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

Fax: +251 11 5517775

**+251 11 5520874****Email: ministry-justice@telecom.net.et**

**Salutation: Dear Minister**

**COPIES TO:**

Ethiopian Human Rights Commission

Ambassador Dr Kassa Gebreheywot, Chief Commissioner, Ethiopian Human Rights Commission,  
PO Box 1165, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

**Fax: +251 11 618 0041**

**Email: hrcom@ethionet.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 22 November 2007.

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