

ETHIOPIA Hundreds of school students arrested in Oromia region

A number of school students have been shot dead and hundreds arrested since 25 March 2002, as police used live ammunition to disperse anti-government demonstrations in southern Ethiopia which are still continuing. Amnesty International is concerned that the arrested students, some of whom may be prisoners of conscience, may be ill-treated or tortured, and may be held for a long time without charge or trial.

Some of those killed or arrested are likely to be under 18. High school students in Ethiopia are aged between about 15 and 20.

The demonstrations, in several towns in Oromia region, were in protest at the regional and national (federal) governments' new educational, taxation and agricultural policies. The demonstrations reportedly began peacefully, but police declared them illegal, and dispersed the protestors with beatings, live ammunition and large-scale arrests.

The Oromia regional president acknowledged that two students had been shot dead in Shambu, about 250km west of the capital, Addis Ababa. However, other sources claim that at least five students had been shot dead in Shambu, naming them as Assefa Fekadu, Bayisa Babisa, Belay Bayisa, Itefa Dirra and Mulugeta Akasa, and that 11 had been seriously injured. Several students were also reportedly shot and wounded in nearby Ambo and Nekemte.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Oromia regional president, whose Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) party is linked to the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), has claimed that the demonstrations were orchestrated by an armed opposition group, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The OLF has been fighting government forces in Oromia since it left the Ethiopian government coalition in 1992. Thousands of members of the Oromo ethnic group have been detained without charge or trial for several years on suspicion of involvement with the OLF. There are frequent reports of OLF suspects and anti-government demonstrators being ill-treated or tortured in custody.

In previous student demonstrations in Oromia state in April 2000, at least one student was shot dead, and many were wounded. After a student demonstration at Addis Ababa University in April 2001, over 30 people were shot dead and some 3,000 arrested, including children, when rioting spread through the city: police admitted using excessive force during the riots, and that there were inadequate regulations governing police treatment of demonstrations or rioting.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of hundreds of school students detained in Oromia region, and requesting assurances that they are not being ill-treated or tortured in custody;
- calling for them to be given immediate access to their families and legal representatives, and to medical treatment as needed;
- stating that those detained who are children under 18 should be treated in accordance with Ethiopia's human rights obligations as a party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: children should be held only in separate

juvenile offenders' institutions or tried in juvenile courts, and in accordance with his/her special needs at that age and with the best interests of the child being the primary consideration;

- urging that those arrested be either charged with recognizable criminal offences and given a prompt and fair trial, or released;
- requesting an independent and impartial inquiry into whether the shootings of demonstrators involved use of excessive force by the security forces or violated the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials or the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.

APPEALS TO:

Mr Juneidin Sado
President of Oromia
Oromia Regional State Council
P O Box 1017, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Telegrams: Oromia President Juneidin Sado, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Salutation: Dear Regional President

Major Befkadu Tolera
Federal Commissioner of Police
Ministry of Justice
P O Box 21321, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: +251 1 517775
Salutation: Dear Commissioner

Mr Herke Haroye
Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
P O Box 1370
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: +251 1 517775
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

His Excellency Meles Zenawi
Prime Minister
Prime Minister's Office
P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: +251 1 552020
Salutation: Your Excellency

Mr Getachew Assefa
General Manager of Public Security
Prime Minister's Office
P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: +251 1 552020
Salutation: Dear Sir

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 15 May 2002.