

UA 176/02

Fear of torture/Police use of excessive force 13 June 2002

ETHIOPIA

Birru Bale (m), former senior civil servant

Tamire Tessema (m)

Tesfaye Adola (m)

Basha Bariso (m)

Scores of others, including children

Police opened fire on peaceful demonstrators in the town of Awassa on 24 May, killing an estimated 25 or more people. They arrested scores of people, including school students under 18. All are held incommunicado, without charge or trial, and are at risk of torture. They may be prisoners of conscience.

Awassa is the capital of the Southern Regional State, which contains the Sidama zone around Awassa, inhabited mainly by members of the Sidama "nationality" or ethnic group. It is about 250km south of the national capital, Addis Ababa. The central and regional governments are proposing to upgrade Awassa to city status, but there is local Sidama political opposition to this.

Hundreds of people gathered in the Looqe quarter on the outskirts of Awassa on 24 May, for a planned demonstration in the town centre against the government plans. The regional government had banned the demonstration, and sent in police and federal troops who dispersed the protestors with live ammunition.

According to local human rights observers, the people had been unarmed and peaceful, carrying green branches and Ethiopian flags. Police acknowledged that 15 demonstrators had been killed, and several more wounded, and said two police officers had been killed by demonstrators. Opposition sources claim many more people were killed and that the two police were killed in a shoot-out between police, which began when one officer opposed the shooting of demonstrators. Many of those killed were school students, including Hameso Kieso, Bunara Gionamo, Tefesse Yeba and Sata Badacho.

Those arrested include farmers and civil servants.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Police shot dead unarmed demonstrators, including children, during previous demonstrations in Addis Ababa in April 2001 and recently in several towns in Oromia region in March and April 2002. (See UA 101/02, AFR 25/010/2002, 3 April 2002, and follow-up, AFR 25/014/2002, 19 April 2002) No police officer has yet been prosecuted for the unlawful killing of demonstrators.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of scores of people detained in Awassa after a demonstration was dispersed on 24 May, and asking for 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 any medical treatment they need;
- stating that those detainees who are under 18 should be treated in accordance with Ethiopia's 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 their 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 in Awassa on 24 May involved use of excessive force by the security forces and 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:

President of the Southern Region State Council
P O Box 18, Awassa, Ethiopia

Telegrams: Southern Region President, Awassa, 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.