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Eritrea: Worsening human rights crisis

The resolutions of the recently concluded National Assembly session seriously undermine the rule of law and the protection of human rights in Eritrea, Amnesty said today in reaction to the legislature's failure to adequately address the deteriorating human rights situation in the country.

Meeting for the first time since 2000, the National Assembly was told by President Issayas Afewerki that eleven former government officials, arrested in September 2001, and who have remained in incommunicado detention without charge ever since, had "committed treason by abandoning the very values and principles the Eritrean people fought for".

In reaction to the President's statement the National Assembly "strongly condemned them for the crimes they committed against the people and their country@.

"By such statements, clearly suggesting guilt, the National Assembly is blatantly interfering with the independence of the judiciary and depriving the eleven detainees of their right to be presumed innocent until and unless found guilty according to law and after a fair trial," Amnesty said.

The Eritrean authorities have consistently ignored national and international calls for information on the whereabouts of the eleven, and at least nine journalists also arrested in September 2001, as well as Semere Kesete, a student leader arrested in July 2001, and some

supporters including three elders attempting to mediate between the eleven and the government.

Amnesty International is concerned that these officials, journalists, student leader and supporters have not been formally advised of the reason for their arrests and continued detention. Due to harsh conditions of detention in Eritrea, the organization is extremely worried about the safety of the detainees, particularly for the health condition of Ogbe Abraha who suffers from asthma, Haile Woldetensae who is diabetic, and Astier Feshatsion who has stomach ulcers.

The organization considers that those arrested may be prisoners of conscience detained solely for the peaceful expression of their political concerns.

The independent press has been suspended since September 2001 for being critical of some government policies. During its recent session the National Assembly reaffirmed the importance of securing freedom of the press. However, it supported the government's actions against the independent press on the grounds that it had jeopardised national unity. It also condemned those A...[sections of the independent press] that took the opportunity - together with the defeatists - and worked against the sovereignty of the country." It announced plans to establish a committee to look into licensing "responsible" newspapers.

The National Assembly is also reported to have issued a statement that "It gave the government full responsibility to properly follow this case and bring it to its final conclusion".

The Eritrean authorities must take immediate action to ensure that the situation of the detainees is resolved in strict accordance with international and regional human rights standards."Furthermore, they must take immediate action to ensure that the detainees are brought

promptly before a judicial authority and released unless charged with a recognizable criminal offence. Any judicial proceedings against them should be before a competent, independent and impartial tribunal offering all applicable judicial guarantees for fair trial, and without recourse to the death penalty" the organization said. All should be given immediate access to adequate medical care and legal counsel, Amnesty International added.

Background

Since July 2001, the Eritrean government has unleashed an unprecedented campaign of oppression against its critics. Apart from the 11 government officials, nine journalists, Semere Kesete and three elders, scores of others were arrested and held for weeks at a time and interrogated over alleged links to the 11 arrested former officials.

The 11 former officials include: Petros Solomon, Ogbe Abraha, Haile Woldetensae, Mahmud Ahmed Sheriffo, Berhane Ghebre Eghzabiher, Astier Feshatsion, Saleh Kekya, Hamid Himid, Estifanos Seyoum, Germano Nati and Beraki Ghebre Selassie. They were arrested in Asmara on 18 and 19 September 2001 and accused of crimes against the nation=s security and sovereignty.

The 11 were part of a group of 15 senior officials of the ruling People=s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) party who wrote an open letter to party members, which became public in May 2001, criticizing the government for acting in an "illegal and unconstitutional@ manner. The letter also called upon "all PFDJ members and the Eritrean people in general to express their opinion through legal and democratic means and to give their support to the goals and principles they consider just." Some of the group of 15 who were holding ministerial positions at that time were subsequently removed from their posts.

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