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## **Ethiopia: Freedom of expression and association under attack**

*Amnesty International today expressed deep concern over the continued detention without charge of Ethiopian human rights defenders, Professor Mesfin Wolde-Mariam and Dr Berhanu Nega.*

*"These human rights defenders are being held solely for peacefully carrying out their legitimate human rights work. The Ethiopian government should release them immediately and unconditionally," the human rights organization said.*

*Professor Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, aged 72, former Secretary General of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) and Dr Berhanu Nega, President of the non-governmental Ethiopian Economic Association and a supporter of EHRCO, were arrested on 8 May 2001 in Addis Ababa. They were accused of "inciting students" following a meeting to discuss human rights attended by a large number of students from Addis Ababa University. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience.*

*Following the arrest of Professor Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, the offices of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council were shut down by armed police for ten days with no reason given.*

*Professor Mesfin Wolde-Mariam and Dr Berhanu Nega have twice been denied bail by the authorities most recently on 18 May, whilst the police carry out their investigations. They are due to come to court again on 25 May. They have been denied access to their lawyers and they have drastically reduced their food intake in protest.*

*The arrests follow weeks of attacks by the Ethiopian security forces on students, opposition politicians, journalists and human rights activists in Ethiopia. A peaceful demonstration led by Addis Ababa University students on*

17 April was violently broken up by the police. Two subsequent days of rioting resulted in the deaths of at least 31 people and injuries to hundreds of others.

Thousands of students and other demonstrators were arbitrarily arrested. These included over 100 members of the opposition Ethiopian Democratic Party, over 30 members of the All-Amhara People=s Organization, and some 100 students mostly from Addis Ababa University. All still remain in incommunicado detention and their whereabouts are unknown.

"Prof. Wolde Mariam and Dr. Nega and the other detainees should be allowed access to legal and medical advice and expertise," Amnesty International urged.

### **Background**

The situation in Addis Ababa has been tense since peaceful demonstrations held on 17 and 18 April 2001 by students and other demonstrators were violently broken up by the police. The government has now put the official death toll from the riots at 31, claiming that 11 of the victims were killed by stray bullets, 11 by gunfire in unknown circumstances, and that nine of the dead had been "hooligans with criminal records" who were shot while looting or destroying property. However, reliable independent sources have said at least 41 people died. Some 417 people, including 164 police officers, were injured in the riots, up to 100 of them seriously. Amnesty International remains concerned that many of those killed or injured seem to have been the victims of excessive use of force by the police.

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