

AI INDEX: AFR 25/03/99
16 FEBRUARY 1999

Amnesty International welcomes Ethiopia's release of 38 Eritrean students

Only weeks after fighting resumed at the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Amnesty International today cautiously welcomed yesterday's unexpected release "on humanitarian grounds" of 38 Eritrean students from Bilattein camp in south-eastern Ethiopia.

"The release of the 38 students is a positive first step in response to calls for the release of approximately 1,200 people of Eritrean origin, who are currently held in Bilattein camp without charge or trial," Amnesty International said.

"Ethiopia should now extend its humanitarian efforts to release any remaining detainees who cannot be charged immediately with a recognizable criminal offence."

The 38 students were arrested during an exchange visit to Ethiopia in June 1998, after the border conflict with Eritrea broke out. Along with the other civilians held in Bilattein camp, they were reportedly arrested for having received military training in Eritrea as part of a national service requirement or for being former Eritrean guerilla fighters.

More than a thousand people remain in detention in Bilattein without having been charged with any crime. They include children as young as 14 and people 70 years of age. At least four civilians and one prisoner of war have so far died there due to health complications arising from the camp's harsh conditions.

In addition to civilian detainees held in Ethiopia, both Ethiopia and Eritrea are currently holding prisoners of war captured during fighting in May and June 1998, as well as during the recent military clashes. Ethiopia has given the International Committee of the Red Cross access to both civilian detainees and prisoners of war.

However, Amnesty International is concerned that Eritrea has failed to follow suit and calls on the Eritrean authorities to immediately allow full access to its prisoners of war and to ratify the Geneva Conventions.

The organization is also urging both sides in the conflict to respect the principles enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, in particular the provisions of its Additional Protocol 1, relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts, which are part of customary international law and therefore binding on all states.

Background

When the border dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea broke out in May 1998, it erupted into ground fighting followed by air attacks by both sides. Mediation by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the United Nations, the United States and other governments prevented the conflict from resuming for seven months, during which time both sides re-armed and mobilized massive forces along the border. There were reports of occasional artillery firing along the border during this time. Intense fighting resumed on 6 February 1999.

The two countries are former close allies who fought together as guerrilla movements to overthrow the Dergue government in Ethiopia in 1991, when Eritrea became a separate independent state.

Amnesty International takes no position on the armed conflict itself nor on the issues underlying it, but has repeatedly issued appeals for both sides to respect the Geneva Conventions.

ENDS..../