

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Ethiopia: Opposition leaders and journalists freed

Amnesty International today welcomed the release of 38 Ethiopian opposition party officials, a human rights defender and four journalists, who had been detained since November 2005. They were pardoned four days after most were sentenced to life imprisonment and deprivation of political rights, and others to prison terms of up to 15 years. Amnesty International considered most, if not all, to be prisoners of conscience.

Amnesty International expressed the hope that this important measure of political reconciliation will be a step towards a more far-reaching realization of human rights in the country.

Amnesty International is renewing its appeal for the release of two other prisoners of conscience accused with them but whose trial is continuing next week -- unlike those sentenced they had opted to submit a defence. They are civil society activists Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie, who were not CUD members. Another prisoner of conscience whose trial is adjourned to October is Kifle Tigeneh, who was elected to parliament in 2005.

The 38 were arrested after demonstrations against the official parliamentary election results in 2005, in which the security forces killed 187 people and six police officers were killed by demonstrators.

They received a presidential pardon with their political rights restored, after submitting a letter acknowledging "mistakes committed both individually and collectively" in relation to the 2005 elections.

They include Coalition of Unity and Democracy (CUD) leaders Hailu Shawel, Ms Birtukan Mideksa, Dr Berhanu Negga and Professor Yakob Hailemariam; Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, founder of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council; and journalist Andualem Ayele.