

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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ETHIOPIA: Recent arrests of opposition leaders and police killings of 46 demonstrators

On 7 November 2005 police brought to court 24 opposition leaders and others who were arrested in Addis Ababa on 1 November following street demonstrations which erupted into four days of violence when police started shooting. At least 46 protesters were killed in Addis Ababa and other towns, and at least 4,000 were arrested.

The 24 detainees include Hailu Shawel, aged 70, president of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) party; Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, 75, former chair of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO); Dr Yacob Hailemariam, a former UN Special Envoy and former prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda; Ms Birtukan Mideksa, CUD vice-president and a former judge; and Dr Berhanu Negga, the recently elected Mayor of Addis Ababa and university professor of economics.

The 24 were taken to the Federal High Court in Addis Ababa. The court ordered them to be detained for a further 14 days (with the next hearing set for 21 November) for police investigations into suspected violent conspiracy, although no one yet has been formally charged with any offence. The 24, who had been kept incommunicado, are said to be held at the police Central Investigation Bureau (known as *Maikelawi*) in Addis Ababa.

Police also distributed a "wanted" list with photos of 34 other CUD leaders and others (making a total of 58 altogether), some of whom were in hiding, others abroad at the time. The full list of 58 includes members of parliament (including seven already detained), civil servants, 11 journalists, CUD activists, lawyers, two investigators of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) and two Ethiopian Teachers Association (ETA) leaders. Police warned that hiding a wanted person was a crime and have reportedly questioned or arrested relatives of wanted persons on these grounds.

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said that these detainees are likely to be charged with treason, which carries a possible death penalty. He said that demonstrators threw five grenades and that seven police officers were killed. Another official called the protests a "rebellion". The Prime Minister said there would be an official investigation into these incidents as well as earlier killings by the army of opposition protestors in Addis Ababa in June 2005.

Amnesty International's concerns

Amnesty International considers the 24 detainees to be prisoners of conscience who have not used or advocated violence, and that the other 34 would also be prisoners of conscience if detained. It renews its call for them to be immediately and unconditionally released, and to be allowed full and regular access to their families, legal representatives, By 11 November, police said some 2,500 of the detainees had been released without charge, but not disclosing the number of those still held.

representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and any medical treatment they require.

Amnesty International fears the detainees may be denied bail and kept in prolonged pre-trial detention in harsh conditions, leading to a lengthy trial with many adjournments, and that they may not receive a fair trial according to international standards.

Amnesty International remains deeply concerned about the health and treatment of the prominent human rights defender Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, who suffers from a painful back complaint. His family were reportedly denied access to him up to his court appearance on 7 November.

Amnesty International calls for the investigation into the killings of demonstrators by the security forces on 8 June and early November 2005, as promised by the Prime Minister, to be impartial and independent, to have clear terms of reference to include taking evidence from the public and members of the security forces, with guarantees of safety of witnesses; to provide an objective account of the events; to investigate excessive use of force by police; to investigate reports of ill-treatment of detainees; and to make public its report and recommendations within a reasonable period of time.

Background

At least 46 people, including women and children, were shot dead by police and 200 wounded during the previous week's protests and violent confrontations between police and demonstrators supporting the opposition party's complaints of alleged election fraud. A woman was reportedly shot dead at home when she complained about the police arresting her husband, a CUD activist. The authorities said that some hand grenades had been thrown against police and that seven police were killed.

The CUD had called for non-violent protests in Addis Ababa against alleged election rigging, including a stay-at-home strike, and a boycott of ruling party businesses for the following week of 6 November. The CUD, which gained a third of seats in the elections, is boycotting the new parliament, which has stripped them of their parliamentary immunity.

There were smaller protests in other towns such as Dessie, Debre Berhan and Bahar Dar in the Amhara Region, and Awassa in the Southern Region. These demonstrations involved students, in particular. Arrests are continuing in Addis Ababa and many other areas. More than 4,000 people altogether have been detained, including many unemployed youth protesters in Addis Ababa, and taken to remote prisons in rural areas, where conditions are harsh. Many detainees are believed to have been previously arrested during the first post-election demonstrations in June 2005. On 11 November, police said some 2,500 of the detainees had been released without charge, but did not disclose the number or whereabouts of those still held.

This follows an earlier Public Statement on the situation in Ethiopia dated 2 November 2005, AI Index: AFR 25/016/2005.