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had refused to take up their positions in protest and were on trial for allegedly instigating the violence. Amnesty International considered most, if not all, of the detainees to be prisoners of conscience.

Initially, 131 people were charged. However, the trial started in May 2006 with only 76 defendants in court, in addition to four political parties and six newspaper publishing houses. Twenty-five defendants were tried in their absence. Twenty-eight defendants were freed in April 2007 when the judges ruled they had no case to answer.

In July 2007, 38 defendants were convicted. They had refused to present a defence on the grounds that they did not expect a fair trial. Later, it appeared the 38 defendants were about to present a defence, but the judge cut them short and convicted them as charged. They were found guilty of "outrages against the Constitution" and "impairing the defensive power of the state". Five of them were also convicted of "leading, preparing or inciting armed opposition". All 38 had earlier been acquitted of "treason" and "attempted genocide". The prosecutor asked for death sentences for all 38. The court instead sentenced most of them to life imprisonment, with lesser prison terms for others. Four days later, on 20 July, the 38 were pardoned and released at the instigation of the Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, after they signed a letter apologizing for "mistakes" in the protests and promising to respect the government and Constitution. At least one of the detainees claimed after he was released that this statement was signed under duress.

Nine others were due to present a defence, but after pardons were granted to the 38, all but two retracted their defences, and pleaded guilty to the charges in the expectation that they would also be pardoned. They were convicted and sentenced to long prison terms. The seven who were sentenced are likely to be quickly pardoned and released in a matter of days. Currently only two of the defendants, human rights defenders Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie, remain in prison.

The CUD leaders' trial was only one of at least four connected trials of opposition members arrested on the same grounds. More are expected to be pardoned but the CUD claims that some 1,800 members are still being held without trial in different areas since 2005.

Torture in detention

Anteneh Getnet, Meqcha Mengistu and Woldie Dana are currently detained in Kaliti prison in Addis Ababa. All three are teachers and members of the ETA, the largest trade union in Ethiopia, with 120,000 members. The union has been a strong critic of recent government policies.

Anteneh Getnet and Meqcha Mengistu, who are officials of the ETA, were arrested on 30 May 2007. Primary school teacher Woldie Dana was arrested at his home on 4 June 2007. Amnesty International believes that the three are prisoners of conscience, detained for participating in lawful ETA trade union activities. They have stated that they were accused of being members of an armed opposition group, the Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front (EPPF). This is the same charge levelled against Anteneh Getnet and Meqcha Mengistu during an earlier period of detention from December 2006 to March 2007. At that time, they were released after the court ruled there was no evidence to support the charge.

Both Anteneh Getnet and Meqcha Mengistu say that they were tortured into signing false confessions about their links with the EPPF during their detention from December 2006 to March 2007. Anteneh Getnet said that he was taken to a forest, tortured for four days and then beaten until he lost consciousness. He was then detained in Addis Ababa police station and released without charge in March 2007. Although the court did not accept the "confessions", it did not investigate the allegations of torture either.

Another teacher (name withheld) was also detained in an Addis Ababa police station in December 2006 and released without charge in March 2007. He said he was regularly tortured, including by being suspended by his feet and hands, face downwards, with his chest touching the floor, and left in this position overnight. He now has severe problems with his arms, legs and back. The accounts of torture techniques used correspond with other testimony Amnesty International has received regarding torture used by Ethiopian security forces against suspected government opponents.



Anteneh Getnet

Amnesty International appeals

The international community has a responsibility to pressure the government of Ethiopia to release all prisoners of conscience. The government must abide by its obligations under international law to ensure fair trials for all and enforce the legal prohibition of torture and other forms of ill-treatment. The government must also stop the ongoing practice of incommunicado detention, ensure there is independent investigation into all allegations of torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, and bring all perpetrators of such abuses to justice. Amnesty International also calls on the Ethiopian government to abolish the death penalty.



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ETHIOPIA

Political repression must stop

The human rights crisis in Ethiopia continues. Despite recent releases of detainees, including prominent prisoners of conscience, many others are still imprisoned against a backdrop of political repression in the country. Two prisoners of conscience remain in detention following the key post-election trial which saw 38 detainees released in July 2007. Also imprisoned are members of the Ethiopia Teachers' Association (ETA) who state they have been tortured in detention. Amnesty International is calling on the Ethiopian government to immediately release all prisoners of conscience. It is also calling for fair trials for all detainees and an end to torture and the death penalty.



Daniel Bekele (Left) and Netsanet Demissie

Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie are the two remaining defendants in the trial of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) leaders (see below). They have denied the charges against them, and said they had no connection with the political opposition. The verdict in their trial is due to be announced on 8 October.

Daniel Bekele is the policy manager of ActionAid in Ethiopia, and Netsanet Demissie is the founder and director of the Organization for Social Justice. They were arrested by police on 1 November 2005 and charged with "outrages against the Constitution". Both Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie are human rights defenders and legal professionals who have been active in Ethiopian civil society, and were responsible for organizing the Global Call for Action Against Poverty (GCAP) among Ethiopian civil society organizations. They also helped coordinate the Civil Society Election Monitoring Initiative to monitor the May 2005 elections.

The two men are currently detained in Kaliti Prison in Addis Ababa. Amnesty International regards them as prisoners of conscience – people who have not used or advocated violence – and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

Background

The arrest and detention of Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie took place in the context of political unrest which has dominated Ethiopia since the parliamentary elections of May 2005.

Demonstrations in June and November 2005 protesting at alleged fraud in the elections were violently dispersed; security forces shot dead 187 people and wounded 765 others. Six police officers were killed by demonstrators. An Ethiopian Parliamentary Commission investigating the incident found that the security forces did not use excessive force. Some commission leaders who have since left Ethiopia, however, later stated that their findings had been altered by the government before the report was released.

In the aftermath of the violence, tens of thousands of opposition party members were detained for periods of up to several months without charge or trial. In December 2005, 131 opposition politicians, journalists and human rights defenders were placed on trial for offences ranging from attempted genocide, and outrages against the Constitution, to treason. All of these offences carry the death penalty. Many of those put on trial, therefore, faced possible death sentences for offences which appear to have stemmed merely from the peaceful expression of their political beliefs.

The May elections and the subsequent demonstrations and arrests occurred in the context of a country in the throes of widespread violence. Armed rebellions and counter-insurgency operations in the Oromia, Gambela and Somali Regions have been marked by wide scale arrests and the torture and killing of civilians, predominantly by government forces. There have been tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea over their contested border.

The trial of the CUD leaders and others

The most politically significant of the post-election trials has been that of the detained CUD leaders, journalists and human rights defenders. The defendants include several who were elected to parliament and to Addis Ababa City Council but