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MEDIA ADVISORY

ETHIOPIA

Open Letter to international conference on establishing a Human Rights Commission and Ombudsman's Office in Ethiopia 18-22 May 1998

As more than 100 human rights professionals from all over the world gather in Addis Ababa to attend a conference this week on the establishment of a Human Rights Commission and Ombudsman in Ethiopia, Amnesty International is calling on conference participants to press for an end to human rights violations, including torture, "disappearances" and arbitrary detentions of suspected government opponents.

In an Open Letter to the conference participants, including hundreds of Ethiopian government officials and the western embassies funding the conference, Amnesty International -- which has not been invited -- is appealing to them to press for a Human Rights Commission to be made an effective mechanism to protect human rights. It is asking them:

- to make a long-term commitment to work for human rights in Ethiopia.
- to appeal for the release of prisoners of conscience in Ethiopia, including eight human rights defenders from the Human Rights League (an Oromo community organization) who have been charged with armed conspiracy, and several journalists detained on account of publishing articles critical of the government.
- to ensure that the Human Rights Commission is consistent with international standards as set out by the UN Commission on Human Rights (known as the "Paris Principles") and that it is designed to meet local needs.

Even the best Human Rights Commission, however, is no substitute for legal safeguards against abuses, an impartial and effective judiciary, and public and determined government action to hold violators accountable and prevent impunity. These are not yet sufficiently established in Ethiopia. More than 2,000 officials of the former Dergue government are currently on trial for genocide, but there seems to be no accountability for those violating human rights under the governments formed since the overthrow of the Dergue in 1991.

For a copy of the 11-page Open Letter (AI Index: AFR 25/12/98) or to arrange an interview, please contact the Eastern Africa research Team: +44 171 413 5611/5625 or the Press Office: +44 171 413 5566 (ISDN line available).