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PUBLIC STATEMENT

ETHIOPIA and ERITREA

Civilians killed in border conflict

Amnesty International is gravely concerned at reports of recent civilian casualties resulting from escalating hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea, former close allies, in a border crisis which began on 6 May. Dozens of civilians on both sides, including children, have been reportedly killed in air raids in which hundreds have also been wounded. Thousands of people have fled their homes.

Amnesty International urges both sides to respect the Geneva Conventions. Both sides should publicly state that they will not authorise or permit impunity for deliberate or indiscriminate attacks on civilians by their armed forces, or any attack resulting in unnecessary civilian deaths. Both sides must particularly abide by the principle of distinction between civilian and military targets and never target civilians.

Amnesty International takes no position on the armed conflict itself nor on the issues underlying it.

The human rights organization is appealing to the two countries' leaders -- Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia and President Issayas Afewerki of Eritrea -- to affirm their adherence to the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law which are reflected in the four Geneva Conventions (the "Laws of War") and their Additional Protocols. Ethiopia is a party to these Conventions and indeed is prosecuting members of the former Mengistu Haile-Mariam government for war crimes. Eritrea, though not yet a party to the Geneva Conventions, has an obligation to comply with customary international humanitarian law and accepted codes of conduct during military hostilities.

Amnesty International is urging both governments to issue clear instructions to their forces:

- not to target civilians, either directly or indirectly through indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks on military targets;
- to treat all prisoners humanely, including prisoners of war and the wounded, as well as those seeking to surrender and any civilians taken prisoner;
- to allow access to persons captured in connection with the conflict to a relevant international humanitarian organization, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross;
- never to kill civilians or hold them as hostages;
- to take all other necessary measures to protect the civilian population from the dangers arising from military operations.

ENDS.../