

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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This is a limited action. Please restrict appeals to 25 per Section.

UA 377/94 **Possible prisoners of conscience /
Fear of torture or ill-treatment**

20 October 1994

ETHIOPIA Merid Abebe, aged 37, Chairman of the opposition Omo People's Democratic Union (OPDU), and an employee of the Animal Development Marketing Enterprise
Girma Bekelle, OPDU Vice-Chairman, agricultural official
Dagne Belachaw, teacher
Wessenu Gebeyehu, Ethiopian Red Cross employee

OPDU chairman Merid Abebe was arrested at his office in Addis Ababa on 18 October 1994. He has reportedly been taken to custody in Jinka, the Omo region capital nearly 500 kilometres southwest of Addis Ababa. The authorities have not stated the specific reason for his arrest, except to accuse him of activities against the Transitional Charter (the interim Constitution). Amnesty International fears that he may be tortured or ill-treated.

Girma Bekelle, Dagne Belachaw and Wessenu Gebeyehu are among 17 other OPDU members arrested in Jinka in the last four weeks and detained without charge or trial. Some are alleged to have been tortured or ill-treated.

Amnesty International is concerned that Merid Abebe and the other OPDU detainees may be detained as prisoners of conscience for an indefinite period without charge or trial, contrary to legal requirements.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Omo People's Democratic Union (OPDU) was formed in 1991 after the end of the Mengistu regime when all nationalities or ethnic groups in Ethiopia were encouraged to form new political organizations. It draws its support from the Omo people living in Region 10 (the Omo region, now part of the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Regional Administration) on the Kenya/Sudan border at the extreme southwest of Ethiopia. The OPDU belongs to the opposition Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Coalition, which comprises political groups from among 14 nationalities in the south. It is also a member of the wider opposition Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia (CAFPDE).

In what seems to be a pattern of repression and harassment by government soliders and pro-government political groups, Amnesty International has received reports of the detention of a few hundred officials and members of southern opposition parties in recent months (for example, see UA 364/94, AFR 25/24/94, 3 October 1994). Also reported has been the "disappearance", on 1 June 1994, of Adane Argaw, an official of the Gurage People's Democratic Front. The majority of the parties' offices have been forcibly closed. None of those detained has been charged or tried. Amnesty International believes many to be prisoners of conscience imprisoned for their peaceful opinions.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express and airmail letters either in English or in your own language:

- expressing concern at the arrest of Merid Abebe, Girma Bekelle, Dagne Belachaw and Wessenu Gebeyehu apparently for their peaceful opposition activities, and requesting details of the specific reason for their arrest and any charges

against them;

- urging that they and other OPDU detainees either be brought to court without further delay and charged with a recognizable criminal offence, or unconditionally released if they have indeed been arrested solely for their peaceful political activities;

- appealing for Merid Abebe and the other detainees to be treated humanely and given immediate and regular access to their families, legal representatives and doctors if required.

APPEALS TO

1) Mr Hassan Shiffa

Coordinator of Police and Prison Administration

Ministry of Internal Affairs

P O Box 5721, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Faxes: + 251 1 552020 (or 514300, 511244 or 514042, via Minister of Foreign Affairs)

Telegrams: Hassan Shiffa, Ministry Internal Affairs, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Salutation: Dear sir

2) Mr Mahteme Solomon

Minister of Justice

Ministry of Justice

P O Box 1370, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Telegrams: Justice Minister, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Faxes: + 251 1 550722

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES OF YOUR APPEALS TO:

Mr Kemal Bedri

President of the Supreme Court

Ministry of Justice

P O Box 1370, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Faxes: + 251 1 550722

Mr Abate Kisho

Chairman of the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Regional Administration

Regional Administration Office

Awassa, Ethiopia

and to diplomatic representatives of Ethiopia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 1 December 1994.