

AI Index: PRE 01/432/2011
31 August 2011

Ethiopian opposition leaders detained after meeting with Amnesty International

Two Ethiopian opposition leaders have been arrested after meeting an Amnesty International delegation, which was afterwards expelled from the country, the organization said today.

One of the men was accused of terror-related offences, while the charges against the other man are not known.

“We are extremely concerned that the arrests of the two men occurred within days of talking with our delegates. Although the Ethiopian government has denied it, we are worried that their arrests are not a coincidence, but because they spoke to Amnesty International,” said Michelle Kagari, deputy programme director for Africa.

Bekele Gerba, deputy Chairman of the opposition Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) and Olbana Lelisa of the Oromo People’s Congress party (OPC) were both arrested on 27 August.

On the same day that the two men were arrested, the Amnesty International delegation was called to a government meeting, where they were ordered to leave the country.

Bekele Gerba, an English teacher at Addis Ababa University, was arrested on allegations of belonging to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), a charge the government often uses to silence members of the Oromo political opposition. It has not been made public what Olbana Lelisa is accused of, but it is anticipated that the charges will be the same.

Amnesty International delegates had met with Olbana Lelisa the day before his arrest, to exchange information. They also met with Bekele Gerba, four days before his arrest. Amnesty International delegates were photographed by secret service agents leaving his office after the meeting.

In that meeting Bekele Gerba had explained to Amnesty International the irony of Oromo politicians being accused of belonging to the OLF. ‘The OLF don’t like us,’ he said. ‘They say we are legitimising the rule of the EPRDF [the ruling party], they say we are their puppets and our struggle does not bear any fruit.’

Both men were long-standing opposition politicians, who had campaigned openly in the 2010 national elections. “The arrests are indicative of the constant harassment of opposition politicians, and severe stifling of freedom of expression in the country”, said Michelle Kagari.

The two men are now being held in the federal police investigation centre, ‘Maikelawi’, from where Amnesty International has received countless reports of the use of torture. Furthermore, detainees at Maikelawi are, as a general rule, denied access to lawyers or family members, for periods of up to one or two months.

The Amnesty International delegates were under constant surveillance during the twelve days they spent in the country before being expelled. “We are now extremely concerned for the safety of everyone our delegates met with while they were in the country,” said Michelle Kagari.