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Ethiopia: Prisoners of conscience and prominent human rights defender convicted

An Ethiopian court on 11 June convicted 38 defendants part-way through the long-running trial of leaders of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) party, journalists and civil society activists. The 38 had refused to submit a defence, as they considered they would not receive a fair trial. Following the completion of the prosecution case, the judges declared the 38 "guilty as charged," as well as five people abroad who were tried in their absence, and three publishing companies. The trial continues for nine defendants who will submit their defence.

The 38 were convicted of political offences which carry a possible death penalty or long prison terms. The prosecution is due to propose sentences on 9 July but no date has been given for the judges' subsequent sentencing.

All were convicted of "outrages against the constitution", some for "obstruction of the constitutional process" and "impairing the defensive power of the state", and five for "inciting, organising or leading armed rebellion".

Those convicted, in prison for 18 months already, include Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, aged 76, founder and former president of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council; Dr Berhanu Negga, elected Mayor of Addis Ababa and an economics professor; Dr Yakob Hailemariam, law professor and former UN prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda; Ms Birtukan Mideksa, a former judge; and Andualem Ayele, editor of *Etiop* newspaper. They are among others on trial whom Amnesty International considers to be prisoners of conscience, imprisoned on account of peacefully exercising their legitimate rights to freedom of expression and association.

The trial continues for nine other defendants and a publishing company facing similar charges, who are due to present their defence on 12 July. They include civil society activists Daniel Bekele of the international development agency ActionAid, Netsanet Demissie of the Organization for Social Justice in Ethiopia, two journalists and an elected opposition member of parliament. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience.

This major political trial, which opened in May 2006, relates to demonstrations in June and November 2005 protesting against alleged election fraud. The demonstrations began peacefully but ended with government forces shooting dead a total of 193 people, and wounding 765 men, women and children.

Earlier on 10 April 2007, 28 defendants had been freed when the judges ruled they had no case to answer after the prosecution had presented its case. Four other trials of CUD members and supporters are also continuing in Addis Ababa. The trial of Kifle Tigeneh, a prisoner of conscience and one of 10 opposition party members who were elected to parliament in May 2005, is adjourned until 29 October.

Amnesty International reiterates its call for the unconditional release of the prisoners of conscience still on trial. It also expresses its concern at the possibility that the prosecution may call for death sentences and that the judges may impose the death penalty, although the organization notes the reported statement made by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi that there would be no death sentences.

Amnesty International is also continuing to monitor the trial to assess whether it is conducted in accordance with international standards of fair trial.