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Ethiopia: Over 30 reported dead and several hundred detained in fierce crackdown

In the past two days riot police reportedly shot dead over 30 protestors in the capital Addis Ababa and began systematic arrests of leaders and members of the main opposition party, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), as well as several journalists of the private press. The riot police used live ammunition to target protestors in the central Mercato and other districts. The demonstrations reportedly started peacefully but turned into stone-throwing, building of barricades and burning of vehicles when police started shooting. At least 150 people are also reported to have been wounded in the shootings. Police said two police officers had been killed by the protestors.

All CUD leaders are reported to have been detained, including Hailu Shawel, the CUD President, who was badly beaten; Dr Berhanu Negga, the new Mayor of Addis Ababa; Gizachew Shifferaw; Dr Hailu Araya, former editor of the Press Digest publication; and Dr Yakob Hailemariam, a former UN official and International Criminal Court official. All are elected members of parliament. Ms Birtukan Mideksa, a lawyer and CUD Vice-President; Debebe Eshetu; and former army major Getachew Mengiste were also arrested. They are all said to be held in the police Central Investigation Bureau, known as Maikelawi. The government has issued a statement saying they will prosecute leaders of the Ethiopian Teachers Association and the Ethiopian Free Press Journalist Association for violent conspiracy in relation to the demonstrations.

The arrests were sparked off by the start on the previous day of a series of non-violent protest actions called by the CUD, who are boycotting the new parliament on account of alleged election fraud by the ruling party, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Some 30 taxidrivers were arrested for honking their car horns during the previous day's protest action.

On 1 November, after the street protests and police shootings, with a stay-home strike in process and many businesses closed, opposition supporters were arrested by police at their homes and taken away to unknown destinations. They would be due to be taken to court within the 48-hour limit prescribed by the law.

Arrests and shootings, including of several women, continue today (2 November), with several dead bodies seen in the streets and hospitals.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about the arrest of the internationally-known human rights defender Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, aged 75. The founder and former chair of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) for 14 years, he is a retired geography professor and author. He had recently resigned from his EHRCO position to support the CUD's election campaign and write for the private press. He has been ill in bed for the past three months with a painful spinal complaint, for which he has been

receiving regular physiotherapy. Amnesty International fears for his safety and health since detainees are often treated harshly, particularly in the first few days of detention, including by being made to sleep on a cold cement floor, not being allowed to receive food or a change of clothing from relatives, and being denied medical treatment. It is not clear if he has been allowed to take pain-killing medication with him. He may be held in the same place as the CUD leaders. Police later broke into his home and took away documents and other materials.

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, the CUD members of parliament and ordinary members of the CUD, whom Amnesty International considers to be prisoners of conscience falsely accused by the government of violent conspiracy. While Professor Mesfin Woldemariam remains in detention, Amnesty International urges that he be given all necessary medical care in hospital rather than harsh prison conditions without appropriate medical facilities.

Amnesty International also calls for the security forces to be ordered not to use lethal force against demonstrators except where lives are threatened, and for an independent inquiry into the shooting deaths and injuries.

Amnesty International calls on the UN Special Representative for Human Rights Defenders and the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to use all possible channels to secure the release and safety of prominent human rights defender Professor Mesfin Woldemariam

Background

A conference of human rights defenders from all countries of East Africa and the Horn of Africa, meeting in Entebbe, Uganda, is also demanding the release of Professor Mesfin Woldemariam.

Hassan Sheikh Shire, co-chair of the conference and director of a Canadian-sponsored East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project, said: "Human rights defenders stand here in solidarity with Professor Mesfin Woldemariam and demand his immediate release. We call on the Ethiopian government to recognize the legitimate role of human rights defenders in accordance with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. The Government of Ethiopia must take measures to ensure respect for the rule of law and protection of basic human rights."

On 8 June 2005 soldiers shot dead some 42 people in Addis Ababa who were protesting at alleged election fraud. They also detained thousands of opposition party supporters. Detainees were held in harsh conditions and some were badly beaten. After some weeks all were released on bail after short court appearances. The CUD denies government accusations -- which are not substantiated by any evidence produced -- of a conspiracy of violence. The CUD's 109 new MPs are boycotting the parliament, which has removed their parliamentary immunity.