

Ethiopia: Serkalem Fasil (f)

Concern: Prisoner of conscience

Journalist and publisher Serkalem Fasil was pregnant at the time of her arrest in November 2005 and gave birth to her son in the police hospital in June. She is currently at Kaliti prison, Addis Ababa where her cell is infested with rats, cockroaches and fleas. Serkalem's partner, Eskinder Negga, was also arrested in November 2005. He was moved from Kaliti prison to Karchele prison in August.

Serkalem Fasil was one of the 14 editors and reporters of independent and privately-owned newspapers arrested after publishing articles critical of the government's actions during the May 2005 parliamentary elections. The government conducted mass arrests of opposition members and journalists after demonstrations in June and November 2005 protesting against alleged election fraud. More than 80 opposition supporters were killed by the security forces, and seven police officers were killed by demonstrators during these protests

Serkalem Fasil was co-publisher of Asqual, Menilik and Satenaw newspapers and was arrested together with her partner who was co-publisher of Satenaw. They have been charged with treason, outrages against the constitution and incitement to armed conspiracy. If found guilty they could face the death penalty. Amnesty International believes that Serkalem Fasil is a prisoner of conscience, detained on account of her opinions and for exercising her legitimate professional activity as a journalist and publisher.

Freedom of expression, including the right to seek and receive information, has been seriously limited in Ethiopia, as a result of the arrests of journalists and editors, and police closure of their offices. Although no newspaper has been formally banned so far, only a few independent newspapers, such as The Reporter and Addis Tribune, continue to publish but practice self-censorship and avoid strong criticism of the government. There are 20 journalists currently in prison in Ethiopia, most if not all of whom are prisoners of conscience. Amnesty International is investigating whether some of them may be human rights defenders imprisoned on account of exposing human rights violations.

In March 2006, a delegation of the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) visited Ethiopia and met the Prime Minister. He told them that the journalists would receive fair trials. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi also agreed for the journalists to be allowed books in prison, which had originally been refused by prison officials. He stated that he would reconsider the policy of prosecuting journalists for alleged Press Law offences committed years ago. The CPJ delegates were allowed to visit all the detained journalists and witnessed the first permitted meeting in Kaliti prison between Eskinder Negga and his partner Serkalem Fasil, then five months pregnant, who were then detained in separate sections of the same prison.

The European Parliament has recently condemned the Ethiopian government's actions since the parliamentary elections of 2005 and has called for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, including all journalists, currently on trial.

Please write to the authorities:

- Calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Serkalem Fasil and of her partner, Eskinder Negga
- Calling for Serkalem Fasil to be given access to adequate medical care as needed

Please send appeals to:

Prime Minister
Meles Zenawi
Office of the Prime Minister,
PO Box 1031,
Addis Ababa,
Ethiopia