

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Ethiopia: Prisoners of conscience unfairly convicted; face possible 10-year prison terms**

Amnesty International today condemned the convictions of two human rights defenders in Ethiopia on charges of provoking and preparing "outrages against the Constitution", saying that the two men are prisoners of conscience arrested solely for their peaceful human rights work. Both have been held in prison since November 2005.

Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie were convicted today by a majority verdict of the Ethiopian Federal High Court after a trial of over two years. The presiding judge dissented from the guilty verdict passed by the other two judges.

They were acquitted of the main charge of committing "outrages against the Constitution", which carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment or death. However, on the basis of certain witnesses' statements which were strongly contested by the defence, they were convicted on the lesser charge of "provocation and preparation" for the offence, which carries a maximum 10-year prison sentence.

Sentencing will take place on 26 December after the prosecution and defence have made their final submissions.

"These convictions are an outrage – these two human rights defenders should be released immediately and unconditionally," said Erwin van der Borgh, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme. "They should never have been arrested and put on trial in the first place."

"Ethiopia needs to review its criminal justice system. It is deplorable that civil society activists who are prisoners of conscience like Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie can be arrested and unfairly convicted simply for peacefully conducting human rights work."

All other defendants previously on trial with them, including leaders of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and journalists, were freed in July through a negotiated pardon arrangement after they were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment or long prison terms.

Only Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie remained before the court, as they had opted – unlike the others -- to exercise their right to present a defence. They declined to apply for a political pardon, which would have required them to change their plea to "guilty", despite having maintained their innocence throughout the trial.

"Their trial was not fair, and the charges against them were no more than the criminalization of free speech," said Erwin van der Borgh. "The trial has already had a chilling effect on civil society activism."

Amnesty International is deeply concerned that the government barred its representatives from observing the trial in July.

Daniel Bekele is the policy manager of ActionAid in Ethiopia. Netsanet Demissie is the founder and director of the Organization for Social Justice in Ethiopia, which works closely with ActionAid on anti-poverty issues, including the Global Campaign Against Poverty.

Both were detained in November 2005 during mass arrests of people during demonstrations against alleged fraud in the May 2005 elections in Ethiopia. Ethiopian security forces shot dead 187 people during demonstrations in June and November.

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