

UA 56/98

Prisoners of conscience/ Legal Concern

20 February 1998

ETHIOPIA Kifle Mulat, chairperson of the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFPJA), journalist on *Ethio-Times*

Goshu Moges, journalist, *Tobia*

Taye Belachew, journalist, *Tobia* (photo)

Birru Tsegaye, journalist, *Tobia*

Anteneh Merid, journalist, *Tobia*, and EFPJA committee member (photo)

Alemayehu Kifle, journalist, *Zegabi*

Lulu Kebede, journalist, *Nega*

Mukenil Shebo, journalist, *Beza*

Tamrat Gameda, journalist, *Seife Nebelbel*

Amnesty International considers the nine above-named journalists, arrested in the past few weeks on account of publishing articles critical of the government, to be prisoners of conscience. All are members of the independent private press in Addis Ababa. They have been detained for investigation under the Press Law and, though some have been taken to court, none of them has yet been charged with any offence. They are also reportedly being denied family visits. The organization is concerned that they may be detained without charge or trial for a long period or may be unfairly tried and sentenced to prison terms under a Press Law which restricts the freedom of the press.

They are among 25 journalists currently in prison, some since early 1997. Although a few have been sentenced to prison terms of one or two years most have been detained without charge or trial as part of a continuing government crackdown, since late 1997, against journalists of the private press critical of the government.

Kifle Mulat, a former prisoner of conscience, was arrested on 11 February 1998, reportedly for refusing to amend a press release, issued by the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFPJA), listing the journalists in prison. He had been questioned by police two days earlier and threatened with arrest if he did not remove from the list the names of three journalists recently charged with armed conspiracy - Solomon Namara and Tesfaye Deressa of *Urji* newspaper and Garuma Bekelle, general secretary of the Human Rights League and a former *Urji* journalist (see UA 330/97, AFR 25/17/97, 23 October 1997, and follow-ups: AFR 25/18/97, 30 October 1997, AFR 25/23/97, 28 November 1997 and AFR 25/01/98, 8 January 1998, AFR 25/05/98, 18 February 1998). Amnesty International believes all three to be prisoners of conscience.

EFPJA is a member of the International Federation of Journalists and campaigns for press freedom in Ethiopia. The former EFPJA president, Kefale Mammo, is among several private press journalists who have sought asylum abroad in the past year.

Goshu Moges, Taye Belachew, Birru Tsegaye and Anteneh Merid of *Tobia*, a leading Amharic-language weekly newspaper, were arrested on 16 January 1998 on account of publishing an internal UN document outlining standard emergency evacuation procedures for UN staff. The government may have interpreted this to imply that it was not in control of the security of the country. The *Tobia* office was burned down by unidentified arsonists within hours of the arrests. The four *Tobia* journalists had been arrested on several previous occasions.

Alemayehu Kifle, Lulu Kebede, Tamrat Gemeda and Mukenil Shebo were arrested separately between mid-January and early February 1998 also on account of published articles they wrote.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Over 200 journalists of Ethiopia's private press have been detained under the 1992 Press Law which was enacted as a "Proclamation to Provide for the Freedom of the Press". They were arrested for articles which police claimed were defamatory or "incitement of conflict between people". In fact they were imprisoned because the articles were critical of the government. Many were detained unlawfully for some time without being taken before a judge within the prescribed 48 hours after arrest. They were subsequently held for investigation under frequently-renewed court orders. Only a small percentage of them were actually charged and tried, most being provisionally released on bail after some weeks or months in custody.

Prison conditions in Ethiopia are poor, with long delays in obtaining hospital treatment. Abay Hailu of Wolafen newspaper, arrested in March 1997, died of pneumonia in custody on 9 February 1998 - he had been in the prison clinic for two months before being admitted to hospital five days before his death.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing concern at the continuing arrests of journalists who are prisoners of conscience imprisoned on account of articles critical of the government but who have not advocated violence;
- calling for the immediate and unconditional release of the nine above-named journalists;
- calling for them to be treated humanely while in custody and allowed regular access to their families, fully-qualified medical or hospital treatment as required, and the right to consult confidentially with their legal counsel;
- urging a review of the Press Law and its interpretation by judges and police, to be consistent with international standards of press freedom.

APPEALS TO:

Please note: fax tones can be difficult to obtain

His Excellency Meles Zenawi
 Prime Minister
 Prime Minister's Office
 P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Telegrams: Prime Minister Meles, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Faxes: + 2511 552030
Salutation: Your Excellency

Mr Werede-Wold Wolde
 Minister of Justice
 Ministry of Justice
 P O Box 1370, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Telegrams: Justice Minister, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Faxes: + 2511 550278 / 550722
Salutation: Dear Minister

Dr Wolde-Michael Chemu

Minister of Information and Culture
Ministry of Information and Culture
P O Box 1364, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Telegrams: Information Minister, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

His Excellency President Negasso Gidada, Office of the President, P O Box 1031,
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, **Faxes: + 2511 552030**

Mr Kemal Bedri, Chief Justice, Supreme Court, P O Box 6166, Addis Ababa,
Ethiopia, **Faxes: + 2511 550728**

Ethiopian Journalists Association, c/o Ethiopian News Agency, P O Box 530,
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (*Note: this is the official association of journalists
which supports the Press Law and has not criticized arrests of private press
journalists*).

Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association, P O Box 25319, Addis Ababa,
Ethiopia

and to diplomatic representatives of Ethiopia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 3 April 1998.