PUBLIC AI Index: AFR 25/008/2004

19 July 2004

Further Information on UA 180/04 (AFR 25/006/2004, 21 May 2004) Fear of torture/arbitrary detention/prisoners of conscience

ETHIOPIA Diribi Demissie (m), President of the Mecha Tulema Association (MTA) Gemechu Feyera (m), MTA Vice-President Sentayehu Workneh (m), MTA Treasurer Adugna Daba (m) Alemayehu Gerba (m)] Bekuma Yemdo (m) 1 Bilisuma Debare (m) 1 Kebebo Bobassa (m) 1 Addis Ababa University (AAU) students Milkessa Dandana (m) 1 Talila Bulbula (m) Tolessa Debella (m) Bayissa Belay (m)] Teachers College student Ebissa Melaku (m) Legesse Yebetu (m)] Commercial College Teshale Tesfaye (m) Bogale Shifferaw (m) Zewdu (m) (surname unknown)] Technical College

Diribi Demissie, Gemechu Feyera and Sentayehu Workneh and 14 other members of the Oromo ethnic group named above were arrested on or about 18 May in the capital, Addis Ababa. They are currently being held incommunicado at the 3rd police station, the Central Investigation Department ("*Maikelawi*"), where some have allegedly been tortured and ill-treated.

The detainees are accused of being involved in a grenade explosion at Addis Ababa University on 29 April in which one student was killed. The students are alleged to have been involved in the explosion while the Mecha Tulema Association (MTA) officials are alleged to have raised funds for the attack. A number of other explosions have also occurred which the government has blamed on the armed opposition group Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The OLF has, however, denied any involvement.

The 17 Oromo members have been taken to court but, to Amnesty International's knowledge, have not yet been formally charged. The organization considers Diribi Demissie, Gemechu Feyera and Sentayehu Workneh to be prisoners of conscience because the accusations against them relate solely to their humanitarian fundraising for some 300 Oromo Addis Ababa University (AAU) students who were earlier suspended after demonstrations and disturbances at the university.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

These arrests followed several months of demonstrations and widespread arrests of members of the Oromo ethnic group (one of Ethiopia's largest "nationalities") in the Oromia region and Addis Ababa.

Demonstrators protested against the federal government's order that the offices of Oromia Regional State administration should be transferred from Addis Ababa, the national capital, to Adama (also known as

Nazareth), a town 100km east of Addis Ababa. The transfer was perceived to be against Oromo interests. Many are still detained without charge or trial, although some have been released.

Other Oromo prisoners who may also, like many of these demonstrators, be prisoners of conscience, include MTA board members Legessa Yedeta (m), Dechassa Benti (m) and Shane Korma (m); former MTA Secretary Legessa Detti (m) and MTA office staff Ayelew Itissa (f) and Jigas Abdeta (m); several other MTA members; journalists Dabassa Wakjira (m) and Shifferaw Insarmu (m), from the state-controlled Oromolanguage television service, accused of passing information to the OLF; Derare Abdissa (m) of Finfine Oromo Self-Help Organization; and several other AAU students. Ashebir Kebede (m), Lelisse Timkata (f) and Fikreselassie Bulcha (m) of development NGO *Hundee* have, however, been released.

The MTA, the main Oromo welfare association, which constantly denies accusations of supporting the OLF has had computers and equipment seized, and bank account frozen. In mid-July, the Ministry of Justice closed down its offices, alleging it had engaged in political activity.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Mecha Tulema Association officials Diribi Demissie, Gemechu Fayera and Sentayehu Workneh, who Amnesty International believes are prisoners of conscience who have not used or advocated violence;
- urging the authorities to allow all the detainees named above access to their families, legal counsel and any medical treatment they may require;
- asking for them to given access to the International Committee of the Red Cross, which visits prisoners in Ethiopia;
- calling for urgent investigation into the arbitrary detentions of other MTA officials, former officials or members, such as Dechassa Benti, Legesse Detti, Legessa Yadeta and Shane Korma, who are also held incommunicado without charge (naming some of those mentioned above and immediately brought before a court and either charged with a criminal offence or released.

APPEALS TO:

Prime Minister

His Excellency Meles Zenawi
Office of the Prime Minister
P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: +251 1 552020
Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Justice
Mr Harke Haroye
Ministry of Justice
P O Box 1370

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: +251 1 520874 Salutation: Dear Minister

Commissioner of Police Mr Workneh Gebeyehu

Ministry of Federal Affairs

P O Box 5068, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: +251 1 552020

Salutation: Dear Police Commissioner

COPIES TO:

Head of Security
Mr Getachew Assefa
Office of the Prime Minister
P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: +251 1 552020

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 16 August 2004.