

30 May 2001

Further information on UA 116/01 (AFR 25/011/2001, 10 May 2001) - Fear for safety/prisoners of conscience/harassment of human rights defenders

**ETHIOPIA Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam, former Secretary General of EHRCO
Dr Berhanu Nega, President of the Ethiopian Economic Association and EHRCO supporter**

Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam and Dr Berhanu Nega were charged with "organising themselves under an underground political party...with the view to changing the constitution through illegal means" and "incitement to violence" at a 29 May court hearing. The penalty for the first charge is 15 years to life imprisonment. There would appear to be no evidence to support either charge. Amnesty International is concerned that the statutes under which they have been charged are so broadly worded that they could make peacefully conducting the right to freedom of association, expression and assembly a criminal offence. In addition, Amnesty International has fears that these same statutes could be misused for that purpose. Amnesty International considers both men to be prisoners of conscience and is calling for all charges to be dropped and for them to be immediately and unconditionally released.

Both men are due to appear in court again on 1 June. Their lawyers say they will apply for bail, even though the first charge they face is non-bailable. Their case had been adjourned at two earlier hearings, on 18 and 25 May.

Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam and Dr Berhanu Nega were arrested after addressing a meeting in Addis Ababa University on 8 April, hosted by the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO). Professor Wolde Mariam is a former EHRCO Secretary General and Dr Nega is a supporter of EHRCO. Although EHRCO maintain that the meeting was only a discussion of human rights issues, the authorities apparently accused the two men of "inciting the students to violence", and they were arrested on 8 May.

They were initially held incommunicado. Since 21 May their lawyers have been able to meet with them once, but have been turned away on two further occasions. Their families have had only limited access to them. Both men have drastically reduced their food intake in protest at their arrest.

Their arrest has provoked an international outcry, and has been condemned by a number of national and international human rights organizations.

The police allowed the offices of EHRCO to be re-opened on 19 May.

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

- expressing concern that the charges against Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam and Dr Berhanu Nega appear to be entirely without foundation, and urging that they be dropped immediately;
- asking for both men to be released immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience, jailed solely for their peaceful work in defence of human rights;
- while they are in custody, asking the authorities to allow them free access to their lawyers and families, and to any medical assistance they may need.

- expressing concern at the continued harassment of human rights defenders in Ethiopia, and seeking assurances that they will be allowed to carry out their peaceful legitimate work without fear of attack or arrest.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency
Meles Zenawi
Prime Minister
Office of the Prime Minister
PO Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Telegrams: Prime Minister Meles, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: + 251 1 552020
Salutation: Your Excellency

Commissioner of Police
Office of the Commissioner of Police
Ministry of Justice
PO Box 21321, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Telegrams: Commissioner of Police, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: + 251 1 550278
Salutation: Dear Sir

Mr Werede-Wold Wolde
Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
PO Box 1370, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Telegrams: Minister of Justice, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: + 251 1 550278
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES 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 11 July 2001.