

10 August 1998

Further information on UA 209/98 (AFR 64/01/98, 23 July 1998) - Fear of ill-treatment / Arbitrary detention and deportation / Possible prisoners of conscience

ERITREAHundreds of Ethiopians detained or deported

Amnesty International's secretary general and several AI sections and Urgent Action participants have received a communication from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated 26 July 1998, referring to letters from members of Amnesty International in various countries who had participated in this Urgent Action appeal. It said: "We are indignant that these allegations are being levelled at the Government of Eritrea by Amnesty International without independently checking their veracity simply because the Government of Ethiopia is fabricating outrageous accusations to cover up the gross violations of human rights that it is perpetrating in Ethiopia".

Amnesty International has replied welcoming assurance contained in the letter that the Government of Eritrea does not have a policy of deporting Ethiopian residents and that the latter will continue to have the right to live and work in Eritrea. The government has invited to Eritrea representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and has asked them to investigate the allegations of detentions. Amnesty International has stated that the international community will be considerably reassured if the ICRC is able to provide its range of services to the Government of Eritrea to ensure respect for the Geneva Conventions in connection with the current conflict with Ethiopia, and if it is granted access according to its mandate to prisoners of war and security detainees. Similarly the presence in Eritrea of officials of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights will be a commendable demonstration of commitment by the Government to protection of human rights in the times ahead.

With regard to the situation of Eritreans in Ethiopia, Amnesty International has informed the Eritrean Foreign Minister, Mr Haile Wolde-Tensae, about its concerns and urgent appeals since mid-June for the thousands of arbitrary detentions and deportations and ill-treatment of men, women and children of Eritrean origin in Ethiopia (UA 177/98 and updates). The Ethiopian authorities have not replied to Amnesty International's appeals or halted the detentions and deportations.

Amnesty International has clarified that although these issues in Eritrea and Ethiopia bear some similarity, the scale of proven abuses has been very different in terms of the numbers of people affected: the detentions in Ethiopia number some thousands and the deportations have apparently surpassed 12,000, whereas the allegations concerning Eritrea refer to a very much smaller number.

In view of this positive response from the Government of Eritrea, we are not asking Urgent Action participants to write further letters to the Eritrean authorities on this issue, except that if you wish you may reply along the same lines as above. Amnesty International is continuing its investigations and will bring relevant information to the attention of the Eritrean authorities.