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ETHIOPIA: COURT JAILS GOVERNMENT OPPONENTS

On Monday 27 June, the Central High Court in Addis Ababa sentenced a medical professor and four other members of an opposition group, the All-Amhara People's Organization (AAPO), to two years' imprisonment.

"The five convicted prisoners appear to have been imprisoned on the basis of slender and dubious evidence and without direct proof of the alleged conspiracy", Amnesty International said today.

The human rights organization has not yet received the full details of the judgement, but at this stage it seems that the judges relied on prosecution evidence which was not properly corroborated.

This evidence included a written note apparently found by the police at the university and a statement made to the police during the preliminary investigations by a witness who died before the trial. All five men denied the charges of incitement to violence and are appealing to the Supreme Court to overturn the sentences.

Professor Asrat Woldeyes, 65, had been free on bail during the long trial but the other four - Sileshi Mulatu, 61, AAPO's office manager, Teshome Bimerew, an Addis Ababa University student, former army lieutenant Chane Alamrew and Ambelu Mekonnen, a farmer from Gojjam, had been in prison for over a year. A court had granted them bail but the Supreme Court overruled it.

The five men were arrested in July 1993 and charged with holding a meeting in the AAPO office nine months earlier at which they were alleged to have planned violent attacks on the government.

Professor Asrat was previously accused of inciting inter-communal violence in 1992 following an AAPO rally speech in Debre Berhan. He denied these charges and has constantly maintained that AAPO is committed only to non-violent opposition.

The government, however, and the state-controlled news media have persistently accused the organisation of "war-mongering", although without producing evidence to substantiate this. In a recent interview, the Minister of Defence accused Professor Asrat of "unsuccessfully declaring war against the government for the last three years".

Although the trial of Professor Asrat and his four co-defendants was held in open court and with defence representation, Amnesty International is concerned whether they received a fair trial according to international standards.

The human rights organization is continuing its investigation into the case, but so far it believes all five men to be prisoners of conscience who should therefore be immediately and unconditionally released.

The defendants denied any plan of anti-government violence. They said the meeting had been about complaints the AAPO had received of abuses by government soldiers of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and pro-government militias against AAPO supporters and Amharas.

The AAPO, one of many nationality/ethnic-based political groups in Ethiopia, was founded in 1992 to defend the interests of the formerly dominant Amhara nationality (or ethnic group) and to propagate the "unity of Ethiopia".

The AAPO has reported numerous cases of detentions, "disappearances" and alleged torture and extrajudicial executions of AAPO supporters and Amharas -- including some cases in the past month -- by government troops and pro-government militias in the central Amhara Region and in other regions where Amharas are a minority. The AAPO, along with all other opposition parties, boycotted the Constituent Assembly elections of 5 June 1994.

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