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## **Ethiopia must end crackdown on government critics**

The Ethiopian authorities must end their continuing crackdown on dissent, Amnesty International said today, following the arrest of a prominent journalist and four senior opposition politicians on accusations of terrorism-related activities.

The five were arrested in Addis Ababa on 14 September. They are all accused of involvement with the banned Ginbot 7 group.

All five have been vocal in their criticism of the government, and had recently undertaken public or written activities calling for reform.

At least 100 opposition politicians and five journalists have been detained in Ethiopia since March. All have been accused of terrorism-related offences.

“The list goes on and on,” said Michelle Kagari, Deputy Director for Africa at Amnesty International. “The Ethiopian authorities are using counter-terrorism measures to stifle dissent.”

“It is not plausible that countless members of the political opposition and independent journalists are engaged in terrorist activities”, she said.

The five men arrested on 14 September are: Journalist Eskinder Nega, Andualem Arage, Nathaniel Mekonnen and Asaminew Berhanu, all senior officials of the Unity for Democracy and Justice party, and Zemene Molla, the general secretary of the Ethiopian National Democratic party.

All five reportedly appeared in court on 16 September and were remanded in custody for 28 days while the police carry out their investigation.

They are being detained at Maikelawi, the Federal Police Crime Investigation and Forensic Department in Addis Ababa, which is infamous for the frequent use of torture against pre-trial detainees.

Earlier this month five Ethiopian journalists were charged under the anti-terrorism legislation while another journalist, Argaw Ashine, was forced to flee the country, after he was mentioned in a Wikileaks cable, and was summoned by officials from the Government Communication Affairs Office and the Federal Police for interrogation over his sources.

Well-known actor and opposition party member Debebe Eshetu was arrested on 8 September.

In late August and early September nine opposition party members were arrested, along with 20 other people, on terrorism accusations.

These included Bekele Gerba, a teacher at Addis Ababa University and deputy chairman of the Oromo Federal Democratic Movement, and Olbana Lelisa, an official with the Oromo People’s Congress party.

Both men had met with Amnesty International delegates just days before their arrests.

In March this year at least 89 members of the two Oromo political parties, were arrested. Many of them were former members of parliament, and had campaigned in the 2010 elections.

“There is clearly a pattern of arresting and detaining groups that are critical of the government, particularly opposition politicians and media,” said Michelle Kagari. “Rounding up and detaining people in this manner sends a chilling warning to other opposition politicians and journalists to either cease exercising their right to freedom of expression altogether, self-censor, or risk arrest,” she added.

Eskinder Nega has been detained on several previous occasions. Eskinder Nega, Andualem Arage and Debebe Eshetu were tried on treason charges between 2005 and 2007, along with 129 other opposition politicians, journalists and civil society activists, after the post-election protests of 2005.

All three were found guilty, but freed by presidential pardon. They have been under close surveillance by the government ever since their release in late 2007.

“It seems the Ethiopian authorities are intent on destroying the last vestiges of free expression in Ethiopia,” said Michelle Kagari. “But locking up those who hold different opinions not only violates Ethiopia’s obligations under domestic and international law, but also undermines Ethiopia’s efforts to ensure peace and stability in the country.”