

AI Index: PRE 01/638/2011
21 December 2011

Ethiopia: Swedish journalists must be released immediately and unconditionally

Two Swedish journalists found guilty by an Ethiopian court were convicted on the basis of their legitimate journalistic work and must be released immediately and unconditionally, Amnesty International said today.

Martin Schibbye and Johan Persson were found guilty on charges of ‘Supporting Terrorism’ and ‘Violation of the Territorial or Political Sovereignty’ of the country through illegal entry with the intent to commit a number of prohibited acts.

The men will be sentenced on 27 December. The prosecutor has recommended 18 years imprisonment.

“There is nothing to suggest that the two men entered Ethiopia with any intention other than conducting their legitimate work as journalists. The government chooses to interpret meeting with the ONLF as support of that group and therefore a terrorist act” said Claire Beston, Amnesty International’s Ethiopia researcher.

“Amnesty International believes there is no evidence that the men were supporting the objectives of the ONLF, or were guilty of any criminal wrongdoing. We believe that these men are prisoners of conscience, prosecuted because of their legitimate work,” she added.

The overly broad provisions of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation allow the authorities to criminalise the exercise of freedom of expression.

Schibbye and Persson were arrested in the Somali region of Ethiopia on 1 July. They had entered the region clandestinely to meet with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) which was proscribed as a terrorist group by the Ethiopian government in June 2011. The journalists said that they were following a story allegedly linking a Swedish company to controversial oil exploration in the area.

Reports of serious human rights violations being committed by the Ethiopian government troops and allied militias continue to emerge from the Somali region. Access to the region is severely restricted by the Ethiopian government

Three Ethiopian journalists are also currently facing trial on terrorism offences. Amnesty International believes that they are also being prosecuted for their legitimate work.

“This wave of arrests and prosecutions constitutes an assault on freedom of expression by a government determined to gag the reporting of stories it doesn’t want told,” said Claire Beston.

Last week Amnesty International released the report ‘Dismantling Dissent: Intensified crackdown on free speech in Ethiopia’ which describes the arrest of at least 114 Ethiopian opposition politicians and journalists

since March 2011 primarily for their legitimate activities and peaceful c