

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 25/006/2004

21 May 2004

UA 180/04 Fear of torture/Arbitrary detention/prisoners of conscience

ETHIOPIA **Diribi Demissie (m), president of the Macha Tulema Association (MTA)
Gemechu Feyera (m), MTA Vice-President
Sentayehu Workneh (m), MTA Treasurer
13 other members of the Oromo ethnic group, names not known**

Fifteen members of the Oromo ethnic group, including the first two men named above, were arrested on 18 May in the capital, Addis Ababa. Sentayehu Workneh was arrested on 20 May. They are reportedly held incommunicado at the 3rd police station, the Central Investigation Department ("*Maikelawi*"), where torture and ill-treatment of political prisoners has been reported in the past. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience.

Sentayehu Workneh was reportedly beaten at the time of his arrest.

Diribi Demissie is the President of an officially registered Oromo community welfare organization, the Macha Tulema Association (MTA). Gemechu Feyera is the Vice-President of the MTA and Sentayehu Workneh is the treasurer. Others arrested reportedly include university students. The police have alleged that they were suspected of involvement in a hand-grenade attack at Addis Ababa University on 29 April, which killed one student. Police reportedly accused the MTA of links with this incident because they had given financial support to students expelled from the university in January. The police claim they are linked with the armed opposition Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), based in Eritrea.

Amnesty International believes Diribi Demissie, Gemechu Feyera and Sentayehu Workneh are prisoners of conscience who have not advocated violence or supported the OLF. The MTA is a non-political organization which has been working for over 40 years, despite frequent government harassment. It has recently been raising funds to assist over 300 Oromo students arrested on campus on 21 January when they protested about the earlier arrests of eight Oromo students accused of damaging university property, including breaking windows. The 300 were released after a few days, and the eight were later also released on bail. The 300 had been taken to Kolfe police training centre, forced to crawl on stones and beaten. Most were later suspended and 25 expelled from the university. (See UA 30/04, AFR 25/003/2004, 23 January)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

These arrests follow over four months of disturbances and arrests of members of the Oromo ethnic group (one of Ethiopia's largest "nationalities") in the Oromia region and Addis Ababa. They were protesting against the federal government's order that the offices of the Oromia Regional State administration should be transferred from Addis Ababa, the national capital, to Adama (also known as Nazareth), a town 100km east of Addis Ababa. The transfer was perceived to be against Oromo interests.

On 4 January 2004 the MTA organised a demonstration in Addis Ababa against the decision to move the regional capital. Police declared the demonstration illegal, detained Diribi Demissie, other MTA officials and many demonstrators for some hours or days, and beat demonstrators with sticks to disperse them. Many of those detained reported they were severely beaten in detention. (See UA 03/04, AFR 25/001/2004, 6 January)

In February and March hundreds of students and teachers were arrested in the Oromia region because of similar demonstrations and demands for the release of students. Many are still detained without trial, and

have allegedly been tortured. Many schools in Oromia region are still closed and arrests are continuing (See UA 148/04, AFR 25/005/2004, 19 April).

In the past two months several grenades have been thrown in schools and colleges, in the Oromia region as well as Addis Ababa University, killing at least three and possibly as many as seven students, and injuring dozens. The government has blamed the OLF for instigating the demonstrations and bombings, which it has denied. During this time several other Oromos have been arrested in Addis Ababa and accused of links with the OLF. They are held incommunicado, their whereabouts not known, and they may be prisoners of conscience. Among them are people connected with the MTA: board members Dechassa Benti (m) and Shane Korma (m), and former Secretary Legesse Detti (m), arrested in mid-March; Dabassa Wakjira (m) and Shifferaw Insemmu (m), from the state-controlled Oromo-language television service, who were arrested on 22 April and accused of passing information to the OLF; Ashebir Kebede (m), Lelisse Timkata (f) and Fikreselassie Bulcha (m) of development NGO *Hundee*, and Dirar Abdissa (m) of Finfine Oromo Self-Help Organization.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Macha Tulema Association officials Diribi Demissie, Gemechu Fayera and Sentayehu Workneh, who Amnesty International believes are prisoners of conscience who have not used or advocated violence;
- expressing concern that they are held incommunicado and are at risk of torture or ill-treatment;
- urging the authorities to bring all 16 prisoners before a court and allow them access to their families, legal counsel and medical treatment and the International Committee of the Red Cross, which visits prisons in Ethiopia;
- calling for urgent investigation into the arbitrary detentions of other MTA officials or former officials, such as Dechassa Benti, Legesse Detti and Shane Korma, and others accused of similar offences also held incommunicado without charge (naming some of those mentioned above), and pressing for them to be allowed access to their families and legal counsel, and immediately brought before a court and either charged with a criminal offence or released.

APPEALS TO:

Prime Minister

His Excellency Meles Zenawi

Office of the Prime Minister

P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Telegrams: Prime Minister, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: +251 1 552020

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Justice

Mr Harke Haroye

Ministry of Justice

P O Box 1370

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: +251 1 520874/517775

Salutation: Dear Minister

Commissioner of Police

Mr Workneh Gebeyehu

Ministry of Federal Affairs

P O Box 5068, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Telegrams: Police Commissioner, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: +251 1 552020

Salutation: Dear Police Commissioner

COPIES TO:

Head of Security

Mr Getachew Assefa

Office of the Prime Minister

P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: +251 1 552020

and 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 2 July 2004.