

PUBLIC

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31 March 2006

UA 74/06 Fear of torture/possible prisoners of conscience

ETHIOPIA
Abraham Roda (m), farmer
Abraham Tula (m), former Sidama Development Corporation (NGO) employee
Abure Assefa (m), civil servant
Dessalegne Gassamo (m), US-AID educational advisor
Edasso Ebissa (m), farmer
Musse Alemayehu, civil servant, agricultural department
Tadesse Washo (m), nurse
Tefera Janba (m), Awassa Tabour school student
Yosef Lalimo (m), Awassa Tabour school student

Those named above are among some 60 people reportedly detained without charge after being arrested on or after 12 March 2006 in connection with demonstrations by members of the Sidama ethnic group. The demonstrations took place on 12 March in Awassa town, the Southern Regional State capital, and other nearby towns. One student, Tefera Janba, is reportedly ill as a result of being tortured in custody. Amnesty International does not have confirmed details of his condition or information about whether he is receiving medical treatment. All of those detained are at risk of torture or ill-treatment and may be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful expression of their views.

Demonstrators were reportedly beaten by federal police, and some were reportedly shot dead, although details are unconfirmed. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested, including many students. Most have been released from custody. Some were taken to court in Awassa but were released without being charged.

Most of those still held were arrested in Awassa and Yirgalem and are reportedly being held in Awassa prison, although some are held in other prisons and police stations, including Yirgalem, Lakoo, and Wondo. Dessalegne Gassamo was arrested in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, and was transferred to custody in Awassa.

The demonstrators were renewing previous Sidama demands for the Sidama zone, where a majority of the population is of the Sidama ethnic group (or "nationality"), to be upgraded to a regional state and thereby provide Sidama people with greater political representation. The current Southern Regional State (known as the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State) comprises several zones and many southern "nationalities". The federal government opposes this change of administrative bodies.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Hundreds of people, including many Awassa University students, were previously arrested at demonstrations in Awassa and Yirgalem over the status of the Sidama zone on 2 February 2006. Most were released after a few days, but several suspected demonstration leaders are reportedly still detained after being taken to court. They are reportedly not yet charged with any offence.

At least 25 peaceful demonstrators were shot dead on 24 May 2002 by police in Awassa, and dozens were detained for long periods without charge or trial, some not being released until early 2004. They had opposed a government proposal to make Awassa a federal city while retaining it as the regional capital, and to move the Sidama zone capital to another town. They believed this would decrease Sidama influence in the southern regional government.

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

- expressing concern that the above-mentioned are among some 60 people reportedly still detained without charge in Awassa and other southern towns after demonstrations on 12 March calling for Sidama administrative zone to be upgraded to a regional state;
- calling for them to be either charged with a criminal offence or else released without further delay;
- calling for an impartial investigation into reports that some demonstrators were killed by police shooting, and that Tefera Janba, a student, was tortured in custody.

APPEALS TO:

Prime Minister

His Excellency Meles Zenawi, Office of the Prime Minister, PO Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 1 552020 [note revised code]

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Justice

Mr Assefa Kesito, Ministry of Justice, PO Box 1370, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 1 520874

Email: ministry-justice@telecom.net.et

Salutation: Dear Minister

Minister of Federal Affairs

Mr Sirag Fegisa

Ministry of Federal Affairs

PO Box 5608, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Salutation: Dear Minister

Fax: +2511 511200

COPIES TO:

President of the Southern Region

Mr Hailemariam Dessalegne

Office of the President of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State

P O Box 18, Awassa, Ethiopia

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 11 May 2006.