

PUBLIC

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Medical Concern / Prisoner of conscience

14 July 2006

ETHIOPIA

Berhanu Negga (m) aged 50, opposition party leader, professor of economics

Amnesty International is concerned about the ill-health and inadequate medical care of Dr Berhanu Negga, a prisoner of conscience who is on trial for treason. He was arrested on 1 November 2005 in Addis Ababa and is held in harsh conditions in Kaliti prison on the outskirts of Addis Ababa.

Dr Berhanu Negga suffers from high blood pressure as well as cardiomyopathy, a heart disease which causes the heart muscles to become weaker, making it unable to pump as well as it should. He was hospitalized on 9 June after experiencing severe shortness of breath. He was however sent back to prison after 20 days, reportedly against the advice of doctors and without having been examined by a cardiologist. Doctors' recommendations that he should be transferred to a less crowded and cleaner cell with better ventilation were also reportedly disregarded by the authorities. Reports suggest that his health has further deteriorated.

In Kaliti prison, Dr Berhanu Negga is held in a large zinc-walled cell, with other opposition party leaders with a total of 270 political and criminal prisoners. It is currently rainy season in Ethiopia and the cell's roof leaks, making the cell cold and damp. Sanitary and toilet facilities are poor. There are rats, cockroaches and fleas in the cell. Other prisoners accused of treason are held in slightly better and less crowded cells in the prison. Prisoners are allowed weekend family visits in a large group, and can receive food, books and other items from their families, but are not allowed to write to them. They are generally provided with medical treatment as needed, either in prison or in hospital but there have sometimes been delays and other deficiencies.

Dr Berhanu Negga's health condition is potentially life-threatening. Amnesty International considers that his medical care does not meet regional and international standards for the treatment of prisoners, such as the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Several thousand suspected government opponents from the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and other opposition parties were detained following demonstrations in June and November 2005 in Addis Ababa and other towns. They were protesting against alleged fraud in the parliamentary elections of 15 May 2005. During the demonstrations, the security forces shot dead at least 86 people and allegedly many more, wounded over 200 others, and seven police were killed by mobs. The detained CUD leaders, including several who were elected to parliament and the Addis Ababa City Council (such as Dr Berhanu Negga who was chosen as Mayor of Addis Ababa), had refused to take up their positions. In December 2005, they were charged with instigating the violence. All defendants except three civil society activists refused to defend themselves, on the grounds that they did not expect to receive fair trial. A parliamentary inquiry is currently investigating the killings at the demonstration.

Dr Berhanu Negga and other CUD leaders, as well as four human rights defenders and 14 journalists, whom Amnesty International considers to be prisoners of conscience, are among 76 people currently on trial. Twenty five exiles are being tried in absentia. They are charged with a range of serious political offences, including treason and "attempted genocide", most of which can carry the death penalty. The prosecution has completed presentation of video and audio evidence, mostly of opposition party meetings, and is currently calling its witnesses. The trial is expected to last several months. It is being held in open court with a European Union-designated trial observer. (See Amnesty International's report on the trial, "Ethiopia – Prisoners of conscience on trial for treason: opposition party leaders, human rights defenders and journalists", May 2006, AI Index: AFR 25/013/2006.)

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

- expressing concern that Dr Berhanu Negga is reportedly not receiving adequate medical attention;
- calling for him to be given access to a trained cardiologist for a full assessment of his heart condition and medical treatment as needed;
- requesting that he be transferred to better conditions in Kaliti prison in accordance with medical recommendations;
- urging the authorities to take immediate action in provide adequate medical treatment for Dr Berhanu Negga and all the other prisoners in this trial, accordance with regional and international standards for the treatment of prisoners.

APPEALS TO:

Minister of Justice

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

Fax: + 251 11 552 0874

Email: ministry-justice@telecom.net.et

Salutation: Dear Minister

Commander of Kaliti Prison

Kaliti Prison, PO Box 2436,
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

COPIES TO:

Minister of Health

Dr Tewodros Adhanom,
Ministry of Health,
PO Box 1234, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Federal Administration of Prisons

Prison Service Headquarters,
PO Box 2234, Addis Ababa, 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 25 August 2006.