

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 25/022/2002

UAI 254/02

Fear of torture/
Detention without charge/

15 August 2002

Possible prisoners of conscience

ETHIOPIA Million Tamato, medical doctor, Sidama zone health officer
Mengistu Gonsam (m), acting director of Sidama Development Corporation
Gamze Gatiso, businessperson
Beshu Tulu, businessperson
Mesfin Kitessa (m), businessperson
Girma Chuluke (m), chair of Sidama zone assembly
Tongola Torba, chair of Aroressa district assembly
Tekelz Dulo
and hundreds of others

Hundreds of people have been detained in Awassa, capital of Ethiopia's Southern Region, in a second wave of arrests that began in late July in connection with a peaceful demonstration on 24 May. They are reportedly being held incommunicado without charge or trial, and may be at risk of torture or ill-treatment. Many of them may be prisoners of conscience, detained without charge for their non-violent opinions.

Those arrested are from the local Sidama "nationality" or ethnic group. They have been accused of instigating a demonstration which 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. Many people believed this would decrease Sidama's influence in local government.

The detainees include local government elected officials from the ruling regional party, the Sidama People's Democratic Organization (SPDO), as well as supporters of the opposition Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM), which claims the May 2000 elections were unfair. Other detainees are businesspeople and people without political affiliation, such as the official of the independent Sidama Development Corporation, a local non-governmental development organization, another of whose officials, Solomon Shemana Lala, was arrested in June (see UAI 177/02, AFR 25/013/2002, 13 June 2002, and follow-up, AFR 25/017/2002, 28 June 2002).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 24 May, 7,000 people from Awassa and surrounding villages marched in a peaceful demonstration, carrying branches and Ethiopian flags, to protest against the proposed changes to the status of Awassa. Police used live ammunition without warning against the unarmed demonstrators, killing at least 25 (possibly many more) and wounding many others. Two police officers were killed, which the regional government blamed on demonstrators, while others claimed they were killed in a disagreement between police about the orders to shoot. There were numerous arrests following the May demonstrations. Most of those arrested are still being held without trial.

Amnesty International has called for an independent inquiry into events at the demonstration. The federal government has refused to undertake this, while the regional government said its own police would carry out the investigation. There has been no inquiry report yet.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of Million Tmamo, Mengistu Gonsam, Game Gatiso, Bezshu Tulu, Mesfin Kiteessa, Girma Chuluk, Tongola Torba, Tekel Dulo, and hundreds of others who were arrested in late July in connection with a peaceful demonstration in Awassa on 24 May;
- calling on the authorities to allow the detainees immediate access to their families and legal representatives, any medical treatment they may need and access to an international humanitarian organization such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC);
- calling on the authorities to investigate allegations of torture and ill-treatment of the detainees;
- expressing concern over the widespread use of detention without charge or trial in Ethiopia against people exercising their right to freedom of expression, of association, and of assembly;
- urging the authorities to abide by their commitments under Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 7 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, and either charge the detainees with a recognizable criminal offense and give them a prompt and fair trial, or release them immediately.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency Meles Zenawi
 Prime Minister
 Prime Minister's Office
 P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Telegram: Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: + 251 1 552 020 (it may be difficult to get through, but please keep trying)
Salutation: Your Excellency

P O Box 1370, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Telegram: Minister of Justice, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: + 251 1 517 775
Salutation: Dear Minister

Major Befkadu Tolera
 Federal Commissioner of Police
 Ministry of Justice
 P O Box 21321, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Telegram: Federal Commissioner of Police, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: + 251 1 517 775
Salutation: Dear Commissioner

Mr Hailmariam Dessalegn
 President of Southern Region
 Southern People's Regional State Council
 PO Box 18
 Awassa
 Ethiopia
Telegram: Southern Region President Hailmariam Dessalegn, Awassa, Ethiopia
Salutation: Dear Regional President

COPIES TO:

Mr Getachew Asssefa
 General Manager of Public Security
 Prime Minister's Office
 P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Fax: + 251 1 552 020 (it may be difficult to get through, but please keep trying)
Salutation: Dear Sir

Mr Harkel Haroye
 Minister of Justice
 Ministry of Justice

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 26 September 2002.