

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 25/026/2006

01 September 2006

Further Information on UA 224/06 (AFR 25/024/2006, 23 August 2006) Medical concern/ Prisoner of conscience

ETHIOPIA

Professor Mesfin Woldemariam (m), aged 76, founder and former Chair of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council

Human rights defender Professor Mesfin Woldemariam has reportedly responded well to treatment for pneumonia in Addis Ababa's Police Hospital. However, he has now been returned to Kaliti Prison, where the harsh conditions of detention mean that his health is likely to deteriorate.

Professor Mesfin Woldemariam was hospitalized on 18 August after collapsing in his cell. According to reports, he consented to the decision by the authorities to return him to Kaliti Prison at the end of August, as he felt he should remain with the other opposition party leaders, journalists and human rights defenders standing trial with him in connection to the demonstrations against alleged fraud in the May 2005 elections in Ethiopia.

However, Amnesty International remains concerned that Professor Mesfin Woldemariam's health may deteriorate again given the poor conditions in which he is held. In Kaliti prison, he has been held in a zinc-walled cell with other prisoners. In the current rainy season in Ethiopia, the cell is cold and damp. Hygiene, sanitary and toilet facilities are very poor. There are rats, cockroaches and fleas in the cell.

In addition to his recent bout of pneumonia, Professor Mesfin Woldemariam also suffered from back and leg pain, for which he has reportedly received no medical treatment at Kaliti Prison. He carried out two hunger strikes in December 2005 and January 2006 in protest at his detention and trial, and it is feared that he is still weak.

One of those on trial with Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, opposition party leader Dr Berhanu Negga, was returned from hospital to Kaliti Prison against doctors' advice in June (see UA 195/06, AFR 25/020/2006, 14 July 2006, and follow-ups). Following a High Court ruling on 19 July, he was moved to a less crowded and better ventilated cell in Kaliti Prison. It is hoped that this move will help to stabilize his health.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Retired geography professor Mesfin Woldemariam, Ethiopia's most prominent human rights defender, has been detained since 1 November 2005, and is among 76 opposition party leaders, journalists and human rights defenders on trial on charges of "outrage against the Constitution", "obstruction of the exercise of constitutional powers", "inciting, organizing or leading armed rebellion" and "attempted genocide," in connection to the demonstrations against alleged fraud in the May 2005 elections in Ethiopia (see UA 284/05, AFR 25/017/2005, 02 November 2005, and follow-ups).

Professor Mesfin Woldemariam founded the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), a non-governmental organization, in 1991. He was its chair until 2005 when he resigned and joined the election campaign as an advisor of the Rainbow Party which is part of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), the main opposition party. The government has been consistently hostile to the EHRCO, which is the only human rights group (eventually officially registered) investigating, documenting and reporting on human rights violations through its central and regional offices.

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. A parliamentary inquiry is currently investigating the killings at the demonstration. CUD leaders who were elected to parliament and the Addis Ababa City Council 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 a fair trial. In early August the trial was adjourned until 4 October due to the annual court recess. Until then, defendants will have no opportunity to bring complaints about their treatment before the court.

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

- expressing concern for the health of Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, who has been returned to Kaliti Prison and is being held in harsh conditions;
- expressing concern that his recent ill-health is likely to have been caused by the harsh conditions in which he has been held;
- calling on the authorities to either release Professor Mesfin Woldemariam on medical grounds, or ensure that his detention conditions are appropriate for his medical needs;
- calling for guarantees that he will receive all necessary treatment for his medical complaints;
- calling on the authorities to respect regional and international standards for the treatment of prisoners, such as the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

APPEALS TO:

Prime Minister

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

Fax: + 251 11 1552020 / 1552030 (please keep trying)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Justice

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

Fax: + 251 11 5517775 / 5520874

Email: ministry-justice@telecom.net.et

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

President

Girma Wolde-Giorgis, Office of the President, PO Box 1031/ PO Box 23698, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 11 5518656

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 13 October 2006.