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Ethiopia: Government passes repressive new legislation

Amnesty International called the Charities and Societies Proclamation law (CSO law), adopted today by the Ethiopian parliament, a repressive law designed to strictly control and monitor civil society in an atmosphere of increasing intolerance of the work of human rights defenders and civil society organisations. Previous drafts of the CSO law imposed strict government controls and harsh criminal penalties on non-governmental organisations.

The Ethiopian government claims the CSO law addresses perceived inadequacies in the existing legal regime, promotes financial transparency and accountability, and provides “proper” administration and regulation of civil society.

Amnesty International countered these claims, saying that based on its analysis of previous drafts the law’s repressive provisions are “an attempt by the Ethiopian government to conceal human rights violations, stifle critics and prevent public protest of its actions ahead of expected elections in 2010.” Amnesty International also considers that provisions of the CSO law would violate international and regional human rights treaties to which Ethiopia is a party.

Among other provisions, if enforced, the CSO law will:

- criminalise human rights activities undertaken by Ethiopian organisations that receive more than ten percent of their funding from abroad;
- criminalise human rights activities by foreign NGOs, including campaigning for gender equality, children’s rights, disabled persons’ rights and conflict resolution;
- impose disproportionate and criminal penalties for even minor administrative breaches of the law;
- establish a Charities and Societies Agency with broad discretionary power over civil society organizations, and allow government surveillance of and interference in the operation and management of civil society organisations.

Amnesty International urged donor governments – including the US, the UK and France -- and international organizations to condemn the new legislation, and to closely monitor its impact on human rights organizations operating in the country. They should clearly state their intention to use their influence to prevent human rights violations from being committed in Ethiopia under the provisions of this law.

Background

The Ethiopian government’s human rights record deteriorated after the disputed 2005 elections, when at least 187 demonstrators were killed and thousands were arrested, including scores of opposition parliamentarians, opposition party leaders, journalists and human rights defenders.

The majority of those arrested and tried were acquitted, or released post-conviction after presidential pardons were negotiated in 2007. But just last week one among them, former judge and current leader of the new Unity for Democracy and Justice Party, Birtukan Mideksa, was re-arrested. She was told by the Ministry of Justice that her original sentence of life imprisonment would be reinstated.