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Ethiopia: Release of opposition leader welcomed

Amnesty International welcomes today's release of opposition leader and prisoner of conscience Birtukan Mideksa by the Ethiopian government.

The leader of the Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) Party was freed from Kaliti prison on Wednesday after serving 21 months of a life sentence. She had been arrested on 28 December 2008 charged with violating the terms of a previous pardon.

"Birtukan Mideksa was considered a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International," said Michelle Kagari, Deputy Africa Director at Amnesty International. "She was imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of her right to freedom of expression and association. We are delighted that she has been able to go home to her family."

Birtukan Mideksa was first arrested on charges of treason in November 2005 following the May 2005 parliamentary and local elections in which the ruling Ethiopian People's Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) retained control, yet the opposition alleged electoral fraud.

Demonstrations in the capital Addis Ababa, between June and November 2005, were violently dispersed. Security forces shot dead 187 people and wounded 765 others. At least six police officers were also reported killed.

In November 2005 Birtukan Mideksa along with other opposition politicians, parliamentarians, journalists and human rights defenders was charged with treason. She was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment.

After nearly 18 months in detention Birtukan Mideksa and many of her co-accused, were pardoned and released by the government having negotiated an agreement and signed letters of apology.

In November 2008 Birtukan Mideksa spoke about the process that led to her pardon during a public meeting in Sweden. When she returned to Addis Ababa, the Government demanded that she retract her statement, giving her three days to act before her re-arrest.

She did not comply and on 28 December she was re-arrested in Addis Ababa. Shortly afterwards, the Ministry of Justice issued a statement revoking her pardon and re-imposing her original life sentence.

"The authorities must ensure that the right to freedom of expression and association will now be respected and protected," said Michelle Kigari.