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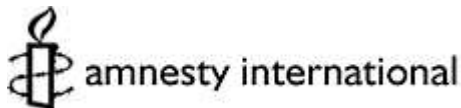
Ethiopia: Civil society groups urge the international community to address killing of Oromo protesters

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CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (DefendDefenders) and Amnesty International urge Ethiopia's development and international partners to addressthe killing of at least 140 protesters in the Oromia region since December 2015.

On 12 November 2015, peaceful protests started in the Oromia Region, southwest of the capital, Addis Ababa, in response to measures taken to transfer the ownership of a community school and portions of a local forest to private investors. The protests have since expanded in scope and size against wider grievances concerning the expansion of Addis Ababa into the Oromia Region under the government's Integrated Development Master Plan. They have also turned violent, resulting in the killing of protesters, and arrests of protesters and opposition leaders.

The government announced on 12 January that it was cancelling the Master Plan, but protests continued the next day in parts of Western Hararghe, Ambo and Wellega where the police and the military used live bullets and beat protesters.

"Use of excessive and lethal force against protestors, coupled with mass arrests of peaceful demonstrators and human rights defenders represent a worrying escalation of the government's on-going campaign to silence any form of dissent in the country," said Mandeep Tiwana, Head of Policy and Research at CIVICUS. "The international community must take up the issue of accountability for these grave rights violations with the Ethiopian government."

The police and the military responded with excessive force to the peaceful protests that began on 1 December 2015, including by use of live ammunition against protesters, among them children as young as 12. Estimates confirmed by international and national watchdog groups like Human Rights Watch indicate that at least 140 protesters have already been killed in the protests.

"The government's labelling of the mostly peaceful protesters as "terrorists" on 15 December 2015 further escalated the response of the police, and the military and resulted in more violations, including killings, beatings and mass arrests of protesters, opposition party leaders and members,

and journalists" says Muthoni Wanyeki, Amnesty International's Regional Director for East Africa, the Horn and the Great Lakes.

Scores of those arrested have been denied access to lawyers and family members. They are reportedly being held under the Anti-terrorism Proclamation and remain at risk of torture and other ill-treatment.

Journalists and opposition leaders, including Bekele Gerba (Deputy Chairman, Oromo Federalist Congress), Getachew Shiferaw (Editor-in-Chief of the online newspaper Negere Ethiopia) and Fikadu Mirkana (Oromia Radio and TV), have also been arrested while documenting or participating in the protests.

The violent response to the Oromo protests represents perhaps the most severe crackdown on the right to peaceful assembly since the contested 2005 elections in which nearly 200 protestors were killed in the capital," said Hassan Shire, Executive Director of DefendDefenders. "The international community's worrying silence on this matter may further embolden the authorities to crank up their campaign of repression."

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other organisations have also previously documented similar patterns of excessive use of force, mass arrests, torture and other forms of ill-treatment against demonstrators, political oppositions and activists. On 28 October 2014, Amnesty International published a report entitled "Because I am Oromo": Sweeping Repression in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia (AFR 25/006/2014).

All those being held solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly must be immediately and unconditionally released. The Ethiopian authorities must ensure that victims of human rights violations by law enforcement officials have access to an effective remedy and obtain adequate reparation, including compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition.

CIVICUS, the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project and Amnesty International appeal to Ethiopia's development and international partners to encourage the government to:

immediately stop mass arrests, beatings and killing of protesters, journalists and opposition party leaders and members;
ensure access to family members, lawyers and review of detention by a court of law for protesters, journalists and opposition party members and leaders in detention; and
establish an independent inquiry into the use of excessive force during the protests. If the investigation finds that there has been excessive use of force, those responsible must be subject to criminal and disciplinary proceedings as appropriate.

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