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Africa : Ethiopia

FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA

Head of state: Girma Wolde-Giorgis

Head of government: Meles Zenawi

Death penalty: retentionist

International Criminal Court: not signed

UN Women's Convention: ratified with reservations

Optional Protocol to UN Women's Convention: not signed

Overview - Covering events from January - December 2005

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Opposition candidates and supporters were arrested, beaten and intimidated in the run-up to elections. Some 9,000 opposition supporters were detained in June for several weeks following protests at alleged fraud in elections in which soldiers killed at least 36 people. In November, police killed at least 42 people after peaceful protests turned violent. Over 10,000 opposition supporters and demonstrators were detained. Ten new members of parliament, 15 journalists, several human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience were among 86 detainees later charged with treason, genocide and other offences. Civilians were killed and arbitrarily detained in the context of armed conflicts in the Oromia and Somali regions, with thousands remaining in detention without charge or trial. Several Oromo community activists were prisoners of conscience. Journalists and human rights defenders were detained and threatened with prosecution for criticizing the government. Death sentences were passed but no executions carried out.

Background



Ethiopia

[Archive information](#)

[Ethiopia: The 15 May human rights – Recon government, election parties](#)
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Seven million people were dependent on emergency food aid, with a critical drought and food shortages in the Somali region in eastern Ethiopia.

The government faced armed opposition from the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), both based in Eritrea. Ethiopia continued to support the Sudan-based armed Eritrean opposition group, the Eritrean Democratic Alliance, although it was not clear that it had carried out any armed activities inside Eritrea during 2005.

The UN Security Council called on Ethiopia to implement its acceptance in principle of the International Boundary Commission's judgment regarding the border areas, particularly its allocation to Eritrea of Badme town, the flashpoint of war in 1998. Ethiopia refused to agree to border demarcation, instead calling for negotiation over certain issues. Eritrea demanded UN action against Ethiopia to enforce the border judgment.

In October, Eritrea banned helicopter flights and other travel by the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), which administered a buffer zone along the border. Both sides had re-armed since 2000 and deployed troops near the border in late 2005. The UN Security Council threatened sanctions against either side if it started a new war.

Elections

In the months preceding parliamentary and regional assembly elections in May, there were arrests, beatings and intimidation of candidates and supporters from the two main opposition groupings, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and the United Ethiopian Democratic Front (UEDF). Election observers from Ethiopian non-governmental organizations were only allowed after they won a court case against the National Election Board.

Provisional results in June gave the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) a narrow majority. The opposition complained about election fraud in over half the constituencies. European Union election observers reported numerous election irregularities. In re-runs in 31 constituencies, several government ministers regained their seats after opposition candidates withdrew, alleging intimidation and violence.

In the final results in September, including from the delayed Somali region elections in August, the EPRDF and affiliated parties won two thirds of the 527 seats. Most CUD elected members of parliament and regional assemblies did not take their seats, in protest at alleged election fraud and at new procedural rules that disadvantaged the opposition. Parliament withdrew their parliamentary immunity.

Post-election killings and arrests

On 8 June soldiers shot dead at least 36 opposition supporters and wounded dozens of others in initially peaceful demonstrations in Addis Ababa at alleged election fraud by the EPRDF. In the weeks following, police arrested some 9,000 people allegedly involved in violent protests, including 2,000 Addis Ababa University students, some 120 opposition party officials, and six human rights defenders. The detainees were initially held incommunicado, and many beaten or ill-treated. They had all been released without charge by the end of July.

- Two air force officers who fled to Djibouti at the beginning of the protests were forcibly returned and detained after being denied access to asylum procedures. They were reportedly tortured on their return to Ethiopia, and still detained incommunicado without charge or trial at the end of 2005.

After the final election results, CUD called for non-violent protests and stay-home strikes. On 31 October, 30 taxi drivers were arrested after drivers in Addis Ababa protested by sounding their horns. On 1 November peaceful street protests were followed by shootings and violence. Riot police killed at least 42 protesters and wounded about 200 others, some at their homes. Police admitted 34 deaths, and said seven police officers were killed and others injured.

In the weeks following 1 November police arrested most CUD leaders, including 10 members of parliament, 15 journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers and a teachers' union leader. The Prime Minister accused them of treason and organizing a violent uprising. They were taken to court, allowed access to lawyers and relatives, and remanded in custody for investigation. In December, 131 defendants (86 of whom were in custody) were charged with the mostly capital offences of treason, inciting armed uprising and genocide against an ethnic group and members of the ruling party. Several thousand school and college students were detained and beaten by police in late December in Addis Ababa and towns in Amhara region for demonstrating in support of the release of the CUD leaders.

- The accused included 55 CUD party leaders and others earlier arrested or declared “wanted”, such as Berhanu Negga, an economics professor and newly elected Mayor of Addis Ababa; Birtukan Mideksa, a former judge; and Yacob Hailemariam, a former UN prosecutor in the Rwanda genocide trial in Tanzania. Also charged, in their absence, were 30 government opponents living abroad, mostly in the USA. Many of the accused were prisoners of conscience. They denied calling for violent protests, and on 28 November began a hunger strike that lasted some weeks.

Other detentions and killings

Thousands of people remained in indefinite and mainly incommunicado detention without charge or trial in connection particularly with the armed conflicts in the Oromia and Somali regions, and arrests continued throughout the Oromia region. Thousands of Oromo school students were detained – and many ill-treated and some killed – in demonstrations in November and December throughout the Oromia region in support of the release of Oromo detainees and other political demands.

- Diribi Demissie, President of the Mecha Tulema Association, an officially registered Oromo community welfare organization, was arrested in February with three other members. He had been released on bail in November 2004. The four were charged with armed conspiracy and membership of the OLF, along with 24 others, including university students and two state television journalists arrested in May 2004, Dabassa Wakjira and Shifferaw Insarmu. All denied the charges. They were all acquitted by the High Court in June but were immediately re-arrested after the prosecution appealed to a different bench of the High Court. They remained in custody at the end of 2005, with the 24 other co-accused.
- Some 900 alleged government opponents, all members of the Anuak ethnic group, remained in detention without trial in the south-west Gambela region throughout 2005. Most had been arrested for political reasons during the killings by the army and civilian mobs in December 2003 in Gambela. Fifteen of them, including former regional president Okello Nyigello, were acquitted and freed in December. Following a Commission of Inquiry into the killings, seven soldiers were charged with murder. They had not been tried by the end of 2005. Government soldiers reportedly killed and arbitrarily detained Anuak civilians on several occasions in 2005, including after an attack by an armed Anuak group on a prison in Gambela in November.

Human rights abuses were committed with impunity by government forces against civilians, including the reported killing of over 20 civilians and political prisoners in Kebri Dahar town in the Somali region in November.

Violence against women

In May the revised Criminal Code made female genital mutilation a new criminal offence punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment. It also increased the punishment for the traditional practice of bride abduction for the purpose of marriage from three to up to 10 years' imprisonment, and made the offence liable for punishment as rape, removing the impunity previously allowed to suspects who married the rape victim.

Women's organizations campaigned against harmful traditional practices affecting women's rights and against domestic violence.

Freedom of the media

The private press, which often criticized the government, remained under pressure. The Ministry of Justice instigated further court action in 2005 against the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA), aiming to replace its leadership with a pro-government group. A court ruled in favour of the EFJA, but in December its president, Kifle Mulat, was charged with treason in his absence, together with other journalists. Most of the private press was shut down.

- In December, three journalists were given prison terms ranging from three to 15 months because of articles published some years previously. Dozens of other journalists and publishers arrested in previous years were on bail awaiting trial on charges under the 1992 Press Law.
- Three journalists were briefly detained during the elections and released on bail.
- Fifteen journalists were arrested in the November round-up of opposition leaders (see above) and charged. Nearly all had previously been imprisoned after unfair trials under the 1992 Press Law. A new harsh Press Law, proposed by the government in 2003, was still under consideration but not yet enacted.

Human rights commission

A National Human Rights Commission, originally proposed by the government in 1997 and finally established in 2004, did not begin functioning in 2005. In March its work plan contained no objective to monitor human rights or to co-operate with local or international human rights defenders.

Human rights defenders

In early 2005, the Ministry of Justice finally registered the Human Rights League, an Oromo human rights defenders group, some of whose founding members had spent four years in prison before being acquitted of violent conspiracy. However, human rights defenders remained at risk of imprisonment.

- Three investigators from the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), Yared Hailemariam, Cherinet Tadesse and Berhanu Tsige, and three EHRCO branch officials were detained for a month in the mass round-up of early June.
- Three prominent human rights defenders were detained in the November arrests and charged with treason: Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, the 75-year-old founder and former president of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, who was in poor health; and anti-poverty campaigners Daniel Bekelle, a senior official of ActionAid, and Netsanet Demissie, president of the Organisation for Social Justice in Ethiopia.

Dergue trial update

The trial continued of 33 former senior government officials on charges of genocide, torture and other crimes. They had been in detention for 14 years. Other trials continued in the absence of the defendants, including former President Mengistu Hailemariam, whose extradition had been refused by the Zimbabwe government.

The series of trials of less senior officials was still not completed at the end of 2005. Over a dozen former officials were under sentence of death at the end of 2005. Mekonnen Dori, 72, a prominent member of a southern Ethiopia opposition party arrested in 1993, who appeared to be a prisoner of conscience, was acquitted of genocide and released in December.

Death penalty

Several death sentences were imposed, but no executions were reported. There were dozens of people reportedly in prison after being sentenced to death in previous years.

AI country visits

AI representatives visited Ethiopia in March.

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