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Free Opposition Members

Mass Arrests of More Than 200 Ethnic Oromo Appear Politically Motivated
April 6, 2011

(London) - The Government of Ethiopia should immediately release members of the ethnic Oromo political opposition detained without charge after mass arrests, Human Rights Watch said today.

In March 2011, Ethiopian authorities carried out several waves of apparently politically motivated mass arrests of more than 200 ethnic Oromo Ethiopians. On March 30, the government confirmed that 121 were in detention without charge, alleging that they were members of the Oromo Liberation Front, a banned rebel armed group. The government told journalists that it had obtained court orders to continue to hold the 121 individuals while it gathers evidence against them.

"The Ethiopian government appears to be back to the old tricks of 'detain first, ask questions later,'" said Rona Peligal, deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "The authorities should immediately free the Oromo opposition members unless they can bring credible charges against them."

Ethiopia's international partners should press the government to release the detainees immediately if it cannot credibly charge them, Human Rights Watch said.

The authorities arrested 40 members of the Oromo People's Congress (OPC) in a mass roundup from March 12 through March 14 in several districts of Ethiopia's Oromia region. Those detained included long-serving party officials and many candidates in the 2010 regional and parliamentary

elections. Several of them remain unaccounted for, OPC party officials told Human Rights Watch.

At least 68 members of the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM), an opposition political party, are among those arbitrarily arrested between March 1 and March 15, according to party officials. Those arrested include former members of Parliament, former local government candidates for election, civil servants, teachers, and students. OFDM officials reported that at least two were beaten at the time of arrest, and the whereabouts of several remain unknown.

Torture is a routine practice at Addis Ababa's Maikelawi, or Central Investigation Unit, where the majority of the detainees are believed to be held, Human Rights Watch said.

Reports of the arrests broadcast on Voice of America's Amharic service have been jammed by the government the radio service said in a statement on its website, further raising concerns that the roundups are politically motivated.

Oromia is Ethiopia's largest and most populous region. Its regional government is controlled by the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), a member of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

The Ethiopian government has a long history of using accusations of support for the Oromo Liberation Front, an armed rebel group that has been carrying out a low-level insurgency for more than a decade, as a pretext for cracking down on political dissent among the Oromo population.

While Ethiopia has valid security concerns related to sporadic bombings and other attacks, the government has routinely cited terrorism to justify suppressing nonviolent opposition and arbitrarily detaining peaceful government critics. The authorities have indicated that they may charge several of the detainees under the new Anti-Terrorism Law, which Human Rights Watch and others have criticized on human rights grounds.

Enacted in July 2009, the Anti-Terrorism Law severely restricts the right to freedom of expression. It contains an overly broad definition of acts of terrorism that could be used to suppress non-violent peaceful protests, and greatly expands police powers of search, seizure, and arrest. The law also provides for holding "terrorist suspects" for up to four months without charge. These provisions violate basic human rights requirements of due process. Human Rights Watch expressed concern at the time that the new law would become a potent tool for suppressing political opposition and legitimate criticism of government policy.

The Ethiopian constitution requires the government to bring a person taken into custody before a court within 48 hours and to inform the person of the reasons for their arrest, a protection that is already systematically violated. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Ethiopia is a party, provides that anyone arrested for a criminal offense shall be brought before a judicial authority and promptly charged.

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