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The State of the World's Human Rights; Ethiopia 2024

Authorities suppressed the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including by intimidating human rights defenders and others, and blocking internet access in Amhara region. Activists, human rights defenders, journalists and artists were arbitrarily arrested and detained and some people fled the country during the imposition of state of emergency laws that were used to target peaceful dissenters. Reports of crimes under international law, including war crimes, were documented in the armed conflict in Amhara region; the Ethiopian National Defence Force carried out unlawful killings, including extrajudicial executions. The prime minister and his government continued to deny such acts and no significant steps towards justice were taken. There was an increase in cases of sexual violence against women and girls; incidents of conflict-related sexual violence continued.

Freedom of expression, assembly and association

Activists, human rights defenders, journalists and artists reported increased harassment and intimidation by the authorities. A nationwide state of emergency, declared in August 2023 during the outbreak of armed conflict in Amhara region between Fano militias and members of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), was renewed for four months in February. It expired on 2 June. It granted sweeping powers to the security forces and was used by authorities to crack down on dissent and suppress the media.

During this period, people involved in peaceful dissent nationwide were arbitrarily arrested, often without due process (see below, Arbitrary arrests and detentions). This forced scores of human rights defenders and journalists to flee the country. In November and December, authorities arbitrarily suspended five prominent human rights organizations. The Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy, Lawyers for Human Rights and Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia's (AHRE) were suspended in November, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, and the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center the following month. In December, the AHRE suspension was lifted. Suspensions of this kind demonstrate further crackdown of the civic space amid ongoing armed conflicts in the country.

Human rights defenders who travelled abroad to engage with international human rights bodies said they were harassed and intimidated by the authorities on their return. Some also reported that Ethiopian government officials, including diplomats, intimidated and harassed them in the countries to which they had travelled.

The authorities blocked internet access in Amhara region, lifting the restrictions in July almost one year after they were imposed. Telephone communication was also frequently restricted.

In August the police banned women's rights defenders from carrying out a candlelit vigil in the capital, Addis Ababa, in honour of Heaven Awot, a victim of sexual violence (see below, Gender-based violence).

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

Authorities arrested hundreds of people nationwide under the state of emergency which had granted them excessive powers of arrest. They flouted constitutional provisions, including the requirement to publicize, via the State of Emergency Inquiry Board (an oversight committee), the names of anyone arrested and the reasons for their arrest within one month. People were repeatedly arrested

without warrants and detainees were denied their rights, including legal counsel and access to courts.

In September, Belay Manay, chief editor of the online publication Ethio News, fled the country three months after being released from the notorious Awash Arba military camp where he was held in harsh conditions. Arrested in November 2023, he was never brought before a court, nor given access to healthcare or legal representation, and was frequently denied family visits in detention.

In Amhara region, the federal army and security forces launched a new mass arrest campaign on 28 September. Within four days, thousands of civilians, including academics, were rounded up without search and arrest warrants. Authorities largely failed to bring those detained before a court within the 48-hour period required by Ethiopian law.

Unlawful attacks and killings

There were continued reports of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in the ongoing armed conflict in Amhara region. The extent of such violations, which included crimes under international law, was likely to be far greater than indicated by the numbers that were publicly documented during the year. The prolonged restrictions on the internet and telephone communications, coupled with the government's denial of access to the country for human rights organizations, limited the ability to report on crimes and other violations. In addition, the threat of reprisals for speaking out was likely to deter civilians from sharing their testimonies, or human rights defenders and journalists from reporting on the issues.

Unlawful killings, including extrajudicial executions, of civilians were documented in the region. Witnesses said that, following armed clashes between the ENDF and FANO militias in Merawi town on 29 January, ENDF officers rounded up civilian men from their homes, shops and the streets, and shot and killed scores. Residents said the killings began after Fano fighters withdrew from Merawi. Eyewitnesses described finding the bodies of their loved ones on the street the following day. Three people said that ENDF soldiers burned 11 three-wheel vehicles, known as *Bajajs*, and a motorbike.

The State of Emergency Inquiry Board announced in February its intention to investigate the killings but, despite continued alarming reports of human rights violations, had communicated no further public updates by the end of the year. Neither did the authorities announce investigations into the army's actions, which included potential war crimes.

Impunity

The authorities made no significant efforts to investigate and hold accountable perpetrators of crimes under international law, denying victims their rights to truth and justice. They continued to dismiss crimes documented by human rights bodies, including the killings in Merawi (see above). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said in a televised speech to parliament that the army does not "commit massacres". His speech coincided with the federal government's implementation of the transitional justice process, which focuses on reconciliation rather than justice and accountability. Nearly two years after discussions on the process began, the government's claims that it would deliver justice and accountability remained unrealized. It was largely a paper exercise, marked by significant shortcomings including the lack of inclusive pre-policy consultation processes, non-compliance with key international accountability guidelines, and disregard for input from a limited number of consulted victims and survivors on the draft policy options on crucial accountability measures.

Gender-based violence

There was a surge in reports of sexual violence against women and girls. The rape and murder of seven-year-old Heaven Awot, whose body was also mutilated by her attacker, in the city of Bahir Dar, Amhara region, sparked national outrage and became emblematic of the prevalence of sexual violence against women and girls nationwide.

In Tigray region, high levels of sexual violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, were documented, leading to protests across the region.

A June report by the Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy revealed that women and girls in the Guji zone of Oromia region were subjected to sexual violence perpetrated by government forces and members of the Oromo Liberation Army.