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The government lifted the state of emergency in June. In August protests resumed in Oromia against income tax increases and calling for the release of Begele Gerba, Merera Gudina and other political prisoners. In February, 10,000 people who had been arbitrarily detained were released. Reports of torture and other ill-treatment, unfair trials and violations of the rights to freedom of expression and of association continued.

Background

The authorities failed to implement the reforms they had promised to address grievances raised during protests in 2015 and 2016 in Amhara and Oromia. The demonstrators had been protesting against the forced eviction of farmers from their lands in Oromia in the past 20 years; arbitrary arrests and detention of opposition political party leaders; and severe restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and of association. Instead, the government declared a state of emergency in October 2016 after mobs torched farms and businesses in Oromia and Amhara following a stampede during the Oromo Thanksgiving Ceremony (Irrecha) in which at least 55 people were killed. The Ethiopian authorities have yet to conduct an independent and credible investigation into the cause and scale of the deaths.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Reports of torture and other ill-treatment of people accused of terrorism persisted. Detainees repeatedly complained to the courts that police tortured and ill-treated them during interrogations. Although, in some cases, judges ordered the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to investigate the allegations, the investigations did not adhere to international human rights standards. Angaw Tegeny and Agbaw Seteny were tried under the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (ATP) along with 35 others, in connection with a fire at Qilinto prison on the outskirts of the capital, Addis Ababa. The two men complained that the police suspended a water bottle from their scrotums and flogged them on the soles of their feet. However, an EHRC report to the Federal High Court did not refer to their torture complaints.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

Arbitrary detention continued under the state of emergency declaration which was lifted in June. On 2 February, the government ordered the release of 10,000 of the 26,000 people arbitrarily detained and arrested, under the declaration, in 2016.

Hundreds of people were detained under the ATP, which includes overly broad and vague definitions of terrorist acts punishable by up to 20 years' imprisonment. Detainees were held in excess of four months, the maximum period allowed under the law for pre-trial detention. Seven Oromo artists, for example, were detained for more than six months when the prosecutor finally charged them on 29 June.

Unfair trials

Hundreds of political activists, dissenters and peaceful protesters faced unfair trials on charges brought under the ATP law. The trials were marked by prolonged pre-trial detention, undue delays and persistent complaints of torture and other ill-treatment.

Prominent leaders of opposition political parties such as Merera Gudina, Chairman of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), and Begele Gerba, Deputy Chairman of the OFC, were tried on charges under the ATP for their alleged role in organizing the November 2015 Oromia protest. Begele Gerba's trial was repeatedly adjourned. Finally the court dismissed the terrorism charges against him. However, it ruled that his trial should proceed on charges of provocation and preparation for outrages against the Constitution or the Constitutional Order as per the Criminal Code.

Freedom of expression

The Federal High Court convicted journalists, bloggers and other activists on terrorism charges and handed down prison sentences. Yonatan Tesfaye was convicted of encouraging terrorism in his Facebook posts and sentenced to six-and-a-half years in prison. Getachew Shiferaw was sentenced to 18 months in prison for sending emails to leaders of a banned opposition political party based abroad. The court convicted him on charges including expressing appreciation of someone who, in 2012, publicly denounced the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

Economic, social and cultural rights

On 11 March, 115 people were killed as a result of a landslide at the Koshe rubbish dump, the largest dump in Ethiopia, located on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, in an area inhabited by hundreds of people. Most of the victims lived next to the site and supported themselves by recycling rubbish. The authorities had been aware that the landfill was full to capacity, and the residents had no option but to live and work there because the government failed to protect their right to adequate housing and decent work. More than 80 million birr (around USD3 million) was fundraised for rehabilitation of the victims. Although the municipal government managed the fund, the authorities had not provided rehabilitation for victims and their families by the end of the year.

Extrajudicial executions

The Ethiopian Somali Liyu Police (Liyu Police), a special force in Somali Regional State in eastern Ethiopia, and local Ethiopian militia, extrajudicially executed hundreds of Oromos living in the Somali Region. Among those killed were infants as young as six months. The Liyu Police also evicted at least 50,000 Oromos living in the Somali Region between September and October. It attacked the neighbouring Oromia Regional Districts and displaced thousands of residents in February, March, August, September and October.

Abduction of children

The authorities failed to adequately protect people in Gambella Regional State from repeated attacks by armed members of the Murle ethnic group based in neighbouring South Sudan. The

Murle gunmen crossed the border to Ethiopia on 12 March and abducted 22 children from the Anuwa community. The authorities were not known to have taken steps to ensure the return of the abducted children to their families.

Impunity

The police and army continued to enjoy impunity for human rights violations committed in 2015 and 2016. During the year, the government rejected calls for independent and impartial investigations into human rights violations committed in the context of protests in various regional states. In the few cases where the EHRC conducted investigations and found that human rights violations had taken place, the government did not investigate or bring to justice suspected perpetrators.