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Head of state: **Girma Wolde-Giorgis**

Head of government: **Hailemariam Desalegn (replaced Meles Zenawi in August)**

The state stifled freedom of expression, severely restricting the activities of the independent media, political opposition parties and human rights organizations. Dissent was not tolerated in any sphere. The authorities imprisoned actual and perceived opponents of the government. Peaceful protests were suppressed. Arbitrary arrests and detention were common, and torture and other ill-treatment in detention centres were rife. Forced evictions were reported on a vast scale around the country.

Background

In August, the authorities announced the death of Prime Minister Zenawi, who had ruled Ethiopia for 21 years. Hailemariam Desalegn was appointed as his successor, and three deputy prime ministers were appointed to include representation of all ethnic-based parties in the ruling coalition.

The government continued to offer large tracts of land for lease to foreign investors. Often this coincided with the "villagization" programme of resettling hundreds of thousands of people. Both actions were frequently accompanied by numerous allegations of large-scale forced evictions.

Skirmishes continued to take place between the Ethiopian army and armed rebel groups in several parts of the country – including the Somali, Oromia and Afar regions.

Ethiopian forces continued to conduct military operations in Somalia. There were reports of extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detention, and torture and other ill-treatment carried out by Ethiopian troops and militias allied to the Somali government.

In March, Ethiopian forces made two incursions into Eritrea, later reporting that they had attacked camps where they claimed Ethiopian rebel groups trained (see Eritrea entry). Ethiopia blamed Eritrea for backing a rebel group that attacked European tourists in the Afar region in January.

Freedom of expression

A number of journalists and political opposition members were sentenced to lengthy prison terms on terrorism charges for calling for reform, criticizing the government, or for links with peaceful protest movements. Much of the evidence used against these individuals consisted of examples of them exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association.

The trials were marred by serious irregularities, including a failure to investigate allegations of torture; denial of, or restrictions on, access to legal counsel; and use of confessions extracted under coercion as admissible evidence.

- In January, journalists Reyot Alemu, Woubshet Taye and Elias Kifle, opposition party leader Zerihun Gebre-Egziabher, and former opposition supporter Hirut Kifle, were convicted of terrorism offences.
- In June, journalist Eskinder Nega, opposition leader Andualem Arage, and other dissidents, were given prison sentences ranging from eight years to life in prison on terrorism charges.
- In December, opposition leaders Bekele Gerba and Olbana Lelisa were sentenced to eight and 13 years' imprisonment respectively, for "provocation of crimes against the state".

Between July and November, hundreds of Muslims were arrested during a series of protests against alleged government restrictions on freedom of religion, across the country. While many of those arrested were subsequently released, large numbers remained in detention at the end of the year, including key figures of the protest movement. The government made significant efforts to quash the movement and stifle reporting on the protests.

- In October, 29 leading figures of the protest movement, including members of a committee appointed by the community to represent their grievances to the government, and at least one journalist, were charged under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation.
- In both May and October, Voice of America correspondents were temporarily detained and interrogated over interviews they had conducted with protesters.

The few remaining vestiges of the independent media were subjected to even further restrictions.

- In April, Temesgen Desalegn, the editor of Feteḥ, one of the last remaining independent publications, was fined for contempt of court for "biased coverage" of the trial of Eskinder Nega and others. Feteḥ had published statements from some of the defendants. In August, he was charged with criminal offences for articles he had written or published that were deemed critical of the government, or that called for peaceful protests against government repression. He was released after a few days' detention and the charges were dropped.

In May, the authorities issued a directive requiring printing houses to remove any content which could be defined as "illegal" by the government from any publications they printed. The unduly broad provisions of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation meant that much legitimate content could be deemed illegal.

- In July, an edition of Feteḥ was impounded after state authorities objected to one cover story on the Muslim protests and another speculating about the Prime Minister's health. Subsequently, state-run printer Berhanena Selam refused to print Feteḥ or Finote Netsanet, the publication of the largest opposition party, Unity for Democracy and Justice. In November, the party announced that the government had imposed a total ban on Finote Netsanet.

A large number of news, politics and human rights websites were blocked.

In July, Parliament passed the Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation, which obstructs the provision and use of various internet and telecommunications technologies.

Human rights defenders

The Charities and Societies Proclamation, along with related directives, continued to significantly restrict the work of human rights defenders, particularly by denying them access to essential funding.

- In October, the Supreme Court upheld a decision to freeze around US\$1 million in assets of the country's two leading human rights organizations: the Human Rights Council and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association. The accounts had been frozen in 2009 after the law was passed.
- In August, the Human Rights Council, the country's oldest human rights NGO, was denied permission for proposed national fundraising activities by the government's Charities and Societies Agency.

It was reported that the Agency began enforcing a provision in the law requiring NGO work to be overseen by a relevant government body, severely compromising the independence of NGOs.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment of prisoners were widespread, particularly during interrogation in pre-trial police detention. Typically, prisoners might be punched, slapped, beaten with sticks and other objects, handcuffed and suspended from the wall or ceiling, denied sleep and left in solitary confinement for long periods. Electrocution, mock-drowning and hanging weights from genitalia were reported in some cases. Many prisoners were forced to sign confessions. Prisoners were used to mete out physical punishment against other prisoners.

Allegations of torture made by detainees, including in court, were not investigated.

Prison conditions were harsh. Food and water were scarce and sanitation was very poor. Medical treatment was inadequate, and was sometimes withheld from prisoners. Deaths in detention were reported.

- In February, jailed opposition leader, Andualem Arage, was severely beaten by a fellow prisoner who had been moved into his cell a few days earlier. Later in the year, another opposition leader, Olbana Lelisa was reportedly subjected to the same treatment.

- In September, two Swedish journalists, sentenced in 2011 to 11 years' imprisonment on terrorism charges, were pardoned. After their release, the two men reported that they were forced to incriminate themselves and had been subjected to mock execution before they were allowed access to their embassy or a lawyer.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

The authorities arrested members of political opposition parties, and other perceived or actual political opponents. Arbitrary detention was widespread.

According to relatives, some people disappeared after arrest. The authorities targeted families of suspects, detaining and interrogating them. The use of unofficial places of detention was reported.

- In January the All Ethiopian Unity Party called for the release of 112 party members who, the party reported, were arrested in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) region during one week in January.

Hundreds of Oromos were arrested, accused of supporting the Oromo Liberation Front.

- In September, over 100 people were reportedly arrested during the Oromo festival of Irreechaa.

Large numbers of civilians were reportedly arrested and arbitrarily detained in the Somali region on suspicion of supporting the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF).

- The authorities continued to arbitrarily detain UN employee, Yusuf Mohammed, in Jijiga. His detention, since 2010, was reportedly an attempt to get his brother, who was suspected of links with the ONLF, to return from exile.

Between June and August, a large number of ethnic Sidama were arrested in the SNNP region. This was reportedly in response to further calls for separate regional statehood for the Sidama. A number of arrests took place in August around the celebration of Fichee, the Sidama New Year. Many of those arrested were detained briefly, then released. But a number of leading community figures remained in detention and were charged with crimes against the state.

There were reports of people being arrested for taking part in peaceful protests and publicly opposing certain "development projects".

Excessive use of force

In several incidents, the police were accused of using excessive force when responding to the Muslim protest movement. Two incidents in Addis Ababa in July ended in violence, and allegations included police firing live ammunition and beating protesters in the street and in detention, resulting in many injuries. In at least two other protest-related incidents elsewhere in the country, police fired live ammunition, killing and injuring several people. None of these incidents was investigated.

- In April, the police reportedly shot dead at least four people in Asasa, Oromia region. Reports from witnesses and the government conflicted.

- In October, police fired on local residents in Gerba town, Amhara region, killing at least three people and injuring others. The authorities said protesters started the violence; the protesters reported that police fired live ammunition at unarmed people.

Security forces were alleged to have carried out extrajudicial executions in the Gambella, Afar and Somali regions.

Conflict in the Somali region

In September, the government and the ONLF briefly entered into peace talks with a view to ending the two-decade long conflict in the Somali region. However, the talks stalled in October.

The army, and its proxy militia, the Liyu police, faced repeated allegations of human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, extrajudicial executions, and rape. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees were widely reported. None of the allegations was investigated and access to the region remained severely restricted.

- In June, UN employee Abdirahman Sheikh Hassan was found guilty of terrorism offences over alleged links to the ONLF, and sentenced to seven years and eight months' imprisonment. He was arrested in July 2011 after negotiating with the ONLF over the release of two abducted UN World Food Programme workers.

Forced evictions

"Villagization", a programme involving the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of people, took place in the Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Somali, Afar and SNNP regions. The programme, ostensibly to increase access to basic services, was meant to be voluntary. However, there were reports that many of the removals constituted forced evictions.

Large-scale population displacement, sometimes accompanied by allegations of forced evictions, was reported in relation to the leasing of huge areas of land to foreign investors and dam building projects.

Construction continued on large dam projects which were marred by serious concerns about lack of consultation, displacement of local populations without adequate safeguards in place, and negative environmental impacts.

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