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Ethiopia: Free Brother of Slain Opposition Politician

International Role Needed for Credible Investigation of Batte Urgessa's Murder



Activists in prison jumpsuits and handcuffs protest human rights abuses against the Oromo people in Ethiopia at a demonstration in London, October 10, 2020. © 2020 David Cliff/NurPhoto via AP

(Nairobi) – [Ethiopian](#) security forces are detaining the brother of, and at least 11 other people linked to Batte Urgessa, a political opposition member who was murdered in April 2024, Human Rights Watch said today. The authorities should immediately and unconditionally release those held without charge and seek international support for their investigation into Batte's killing.

Batte was last seen alive at a guest house in his hometown of Meki, in the East Shewa Zone of Ethiopia's Oromia region, on April 9. Early the next morning, residents found his bound body with a gunshot wound to the head, on the outskirts of town. In the ensuing days, local police announced the arrest of [13 suspects](#) to the killing, including Batte's younger brother, Millo, a family friend, Ebba Wane, and the

owner of the guest house where Batte had been staying. Many of them remain in detention. Batte was an outspoken political officer of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) opposition group.

“The Ethiopian authorities’ detention without charge of the murdered opposition leader’s brother and others suggests that the government is more concerned about preventing the truth from coming out than uncovering it,” said [Laetitia Bader](#), deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “The authorities should immediately release those unlawfully held and seek international assistance for an impartial investigation.”

Two photographs circulating on social media on April 10 show a man, said to be Batte, lying face down in a dry stream bed with his arms bound behind his back with a belt strap. At least one bullet wound is visible to the left side of the back of the head, and blood stains are visible on the lower back. The ground under his head and left shoulder are also stained with blood, indicating he most likely would have been shot while restrained at this location.

A second photo posted to Facebook accompanying the first shows six rifle-sized bullet casings, said to have been collected at the scene, on a piece of paper. Human Rights Watch could not establish the location or date these photographs were taken. However, they were not available online before April 10.

On April 10, Oromia’s regional government released a [statement](#) condemning Batte’s murder and saying that online propaganda blaming the government was unacceptable. In an interview with a US-based Oromo diaspora outlet that [aired](#) on April 11, Millo Urgessa said that witnesses close to where Batte was killed observed people remove Batte from a “ranger,” a common term for a government security vehicle. Millo was arrested that day, shortly after Batte’s funeral.

While Millo and Ebba are held in the Meki police station, the whereabouts of other detainees are not publicly known, putting them at risk of mistreatment. Human Rights Watch has received a list of nine people who remain detained in connection with Batte’s case. On June 12, a Meki district court ordered Millo release, yet he remains in detention. “Security officials are saying they don’t know about him [Millo], that he is not held by them,” said one individual familiar with the case.

Ethiopian authorities had arrested Batte on several occasions, including on March 7, 2021, after he [visited detained OLF officials](#). On that occasion, Batte was held for a year without charge, often transferred between formal detention and makeshift detention sites, including a poultry farm, and beaten by guards. He was released in March 2022 after developing [serious health issues](#). He continued to campaign for the release of his detained colleagues.

“I tried to do what was possible [for my colleagues],” Batte said in a 2023 interview with Human Rights Watch: “I reported their cases [to authorities]. I begged for their immediate release. Yet, there is no solution.... I have never seen this before ... It is only in Ethiopia where you have an authority ordering your release and the police denying the request.... Our office in Addis is guarded by the federal police. No one is allowed to enter ... It seems the government is trying to dismantle the OLF. Or ban the party. Or kill the OLF leaders.”

Batte’s [seven senior OLF colleagues](#) have remained in detention for nearly four years despite court rulings ordering their release. In May, Ethiopia’s national electoral board [called](#) on Ethiopia’s parliament to investigate the ongoing detention of the OLF officials.

Batte was [last arrested](#) in February 2024, along with a French journalist, Antoine Galindo, as they met for an interview at a hotel in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital. Batte was released on bail on March 9 and eventually returned to Meki in Oromia.

The [United States](#), the [United Kingdom](#), and the European Union and several of its member states all echoed a call from the national [Ethiopian Human Rights Commission](#), a federal body, for federal and regional authorities to examine the circumstances of Batte’s death and conduct a prompt and impartial investigation into his killing. US Senator Ben Cardin, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, pointed to the government’s repression of media and the political opposition and [urged](#) the Ethiopian authorities to allow a “credible, neutral international body to conduct a thorough investigation.”

In recent months, Ethiopian authorities have [increased threats, intimidation, and harassment against prominent Ethiopian human rights organizations](#), including the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, the country’s oldest, independent rights group. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CJP) has also [documented](#) a repressive media environment that has forced at least 54 Ethiopian journalists and media workers into exile since 2020.

[Human Rights Watch](#) and other [rights](#) organizations have repeatedly raised concerns about the government’s lack of effective investigations into human rights violations, and about the capacity and independence of Ethiopia’s investigative and judicial institutions, which are subject to political interference. Though the Ethiopian government has announced a three-year plan to reform and overhaul the justice sector, and in April released its nationwide transitional justice policy, the ongoing detention of political opposition figures despite court orders calling for their release, casts doubt on the Ethiopian government’s commitment to accountability and the rule of law, Human Rights Watch said.

Given the sensitivity and importance of the Batte Urgessa case, the government should be requesting international assistance for its criminal investigation.

“The Ethiopian authorities have glossed over or treated dismissively numerous high-profile killings and other human rights abuses against perceived critics of the government,” Bader said. “Concerned governments should make clear that the brazen murder of an opposition politician needs an investigation with significant international participation.”