

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	131
Land:	Etiopien
Kilde:	Amnesty International
Titel:	Annual Report 2008
Udgivet:	28. maj 2008
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	16. september 2008

Ethiopia

FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA

Head of State	Girma Wolde-Giorgis
Head of government	Meles Zenawi
Death penalty	retentionist
Population	81.2 million
Life expectancy	51.8 years
Under-5 mortality (m/f)	164/149 per 1,000
Adult literacy	35.9 per cent

Nearly a million people in Ethiopia's drought-afflicted Somali Region in the east suffered severe food shortages due to a government blockade on humanitarian supplies and food trade in June. Government forces were responsible for mass arrests, torture, rape and extrajudicial executions in a continuing conflict with an armed group.

Thousands of government opponents were detained without trial. Leaders of the political opposition, journalists and human rights defenders, who were prisoners of conscience, were convicted and jailed after a two-year trial but quickly freed after being granted presidential pardons.

Background

There was an upsurge in the 13-year armed conflict with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in the Somali Region. The conflict with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in the Oromia Region continued. The ONLF and OLF received support from Eritrea, while Ethiopia supported Eritrean opposition groups.

Border demarcation following the Ethiopia-Eritrea war of 1998-2000 did not begin and the International Boundary Commission ended its work in November with the dispute unresolved. Ethiopia refused to implement the Commission's judgment. There were fears of renewed fighting between the two countries' troops massed along the border, partly because of both countries' involvement in the Somalia conflict. The mandate of the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), which administered a buffer zone along the border, was extended by the UN Security Council in December.

Ethiopian troops supporting the transitional government in Somalia committed serious violations of international humanitarian law against civilians (see Somalia entry).

Prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners

The trial of opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) leaders, journalists and civil society activists, which began in May 2006, continued. The defendants, including elected members of parliament, faced political charges carrying possible death sentences. Demonstrations in connection with disputed elections in May and November 2005 led to violence in which the security forces killed 187 people and demonstrators killed six police officers. The defendants were in effect accused of responsibility for the violence. The security forces were absolved of using excessive force by a parliamentary inquiry commission report in 2006, but the original inquiry leaders fled the country and said their findings had been the opposite.

The prosecution case ended in April, when several defendants were acquitted. The CUD leaders, including Hailu Shawel, Berhanu Nega and Birtukan Mideksa, as well as journalists who were accused of collaborating with them, had refused to present a defence on the grounds that they did not expect a fair trial. CUD leaders were among 38 defendants convicted in June and mostly jailed for life, although the prosecution had demanded death sentences. However, they were all pardoned and freed in July as a result of applying for presidential pardon in negotiations with government representatives. These negotiations took place outside the trial process through mediation by an independent group of Ethiopian "Elders".

Two defendants presented their defence in July: Daniel Bekele, policy director of ActionAid, and Netsanet Demissie, director of the Organization for Social Justice in Ethiopia. The two human rights defenders were denied bail seven times, and their verdict was repeatedly adjourned. They refused to change their pleas to guilty and apply for a pardon. In December they were convicted and sentenced to two years and eight months' imprisonment.

Eight other defendants in this trial and all 33 defendants in a related trial of CUD officials, including MP-elect Kifle Tigeneh, were pressurized to plead guilty and apply for pardon. They too were convicted, then pardoned and freed.

Amnesty International considered that the CUD leaders, journalists and human rights defenders were prisoners of conscience, who were convicted for exercising their right to freedom of expression, assembly and association. Their convictions were based on evidence that did not prove, beyond reasonable doubt, that they committed a crime under Ethiopian law.

Fifty-five people, including CUD members and several Ethiopian Teachers Association (ETA) officials arrested in December 2006, were accused of having links with the armed Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front (EPPF) force in the north-west. They were charged and most were granted bail in late 2007.

Several hundred other CUD members detained in 2005 were still held without trial in prison throughout 2007. Fifteen refugees forcibly returned to Ethiopia by Sudan in August, after two months in prison in Sudan, were detained on arrival in Ethiopia. Five people forcibly returned to Ethiopia by Somaliland in October and suspected of links with the ONLF were detained on arrival; their whereabouts in custody were not known.

Other releases

Some CUD members were reportedly released in a presidential amnesty in September marking the Ethiopian New Year and Millennium. Over 17,000 prisoners were freed, mostly convicted criminals. Prisoners of conscience released earlier included Diribi Demissie and two other officials of the Mecha Tulema Association, an Oromo community welfare association, who had been detained since 2004.

Freedom of expression

Fourteen journalists were charged with political offences in the CUD trial on account of published articles even though these did not advocate violence. Their publications were all shut down. Seven were acquitted in April, including Serkalem Fasil, who was pregnant on arrest in 2005 and later gave birth to a son in custody in hospital. Her publication company, however, was found guilty and fined. The remaining seven were convicted in June, then pardoned.

A new and more restrictive draft Press Law had not been introduced by the end of the year.

Human rights defenders

Human rights defenders and civil society activists were at risk of arrest if they criticized the government too vigorously.

- Mesfin Woldemariam, founder and former head of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), was a prisoner of conscience convicted in the CUD trial and released in July. He still had a charge pending of incitement of violence in connection with student demonstrations in 2001.
- Yalemzawd Bekele, a human rights lawyer working for the European Commission in Addis Ababa, who had previously been detained for several days in October 2006, was charged in July with conspiring to commit an outrage against the Constitution but granted bail pending a trial set for early 2008.

Armed conflict

In the Somali Region, the ONLF attacked an oil installation in Obole village in April, killing soldiers and also 65 Ethiopian and six Chinese civilian workers. The ONLF abducted seven other Chinese workers but released them some days later. In retaliation, the Ethiopian government mounted a blockade on conflict-

affected districts in the region, causing severe food shortages.

There were mass arrests, torture, rape and extrajudicial executions of alleged ONLF supporters by government forces. The ONLF assassinated some civilian officials. Civilians were forcibly removed from their homes and conscripted into government militia groups.

A UN fact-finding mission reported on the humanitarian crisis, which the Ethiopian authorities partially alleviated, but killings continued until the end of the year.

Hundreds of people were arrested on political grounds in 2007 in connection with armed conflicts with the OLF and ONLF.

- Sultan Fowski Mohamed Ali, a clan elder and government-recognized mediator in conflicts in the Somali Region, was detained in August, reportedly to prevent him giving evidence to a UN fact-finding mission. A prisoner of conscience, he was taken to court but had not been tried by the end of the year.
- Mulata Aberra, a trader in Harar city, was arrested in November on suspicion of supporting the OLF – his third detention on such grounds. He was reportedly tortured, then remanded in custody by a court for further police investigation.

‘War on terror’

In January and February Ethiopian troops in Somalia unlawfully transferred (rendered) at least 85 political prisoners to Ethiopia. Most had been arrested in Kenya when Kenya closed its border to people fleeing from Somalia after the forces of the Council of Somali Islamic Courts were defeated by Ethiopian troops. Foreign nationals from some 14 western and Middle Eastern countries were released after some months and sent back to the countries they had come from. In May the Ethiopian authorities acknowledged still holding 41 such detainees in military custody and said they would be charged before military courts. By the end of 2007 the authorities had given no details of the individuals detained, their whereabouts, or any charges against them. The detainees included Kenyan citizens of Somali ethnic origin, two Eritrean conscripted journalists captured in Mogadishu, and alleged members of armed Ethiopian opposition groups. (See Kenya entry.)

Torture and other ill-treatment

Some of the CUD members and teachers’ association officials arrested in December 2006, were reportedly tortured in the police central investigation bureau in Addis Ababa known as Maikelawi. Detainees unlawfully transferred from Kenya and Somalia were reported to have been tortured or ill-treated in secret military places of detention in Addis Ababa.

Torture including rape by the military was reportedly widespread in the Somali Region after the April ONLF attack. Several defendants in the trial of Kifle Tigeneh and 32 other CUD members claimed in court that they had been tortured, but the judges refused to consider their claims.

Prison conditions for most political prisoners were harsh. Conditions in most parts of Kaliti prison in Addis Ababa, where the CUD trial defendants and several hundred untried OLF suspects were held, were overcrowded and unhygienic.

Trials of former government members

In February, 33 members of the former Dergue military government who had been detained since 1991 and convicted in December 2006 of genocide and mass killings were sentenced to life imprisonment or long prison terms. Trials of other former officials for killings during the “Red Terror” campaign against “anti-revolutionaries” in 1977-79 were almost completed.

Death penalty

In July the prosecution appealed for death penalties to be imposed on the jailed Dergue members but the appeal had not been heard by the end of the year.

The same month a man convicted of murdering the former head of security was executed. This was the

second execution since 1991. Further death sentences were imposed during 2007. Several dozen prisoners under sentence of death awaited the outcome of appeals or petitions for clemency.

Amnesty International visit/reports



An Amnesty International representative attended the CUD trial briefly in March. Other representatives were barred in July when they asked for visas to attend the defence presentation.



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[Ethiopia: Political repression must stop](#) (AFR 25/013/2007)



[Ethiopia: Call for a Millennium for human rights](#) (AFR 25/022/2007)