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Ethiopia

The Ethiopian government continued the heavy-handed suppression and punishment of any form of political dissent as reintroduced following the 2005 elections. While most international attention focused on events in Addis Ababa, security forces and civil officials continued campaigns of repression and brutality in many parts of the country. International donors protested human rights abuses but took no meaningful action.

Ethiopia has refused to accept in full the binding arbitration decision about the border with Eritrea (over which the two countries went to war in 1998-2000), despite its obligations under the armistice agreement of 2002 and numerous United Nations Security Council resolutions. The stalemate with Eritrea persisted in 2006, but Ethiopia was forced to shift focus to its longer and more porous border with Somalia. The Islamic Courts movement that is consolidating power in the south of Somalia has declared holy war against Ethiopia because of Ethiopia's incursions into Somali territory to provide support for the ineffective, UN-recognized Somali Transitional Federal Government. This change of power in southern Somalia allowed increased infiltration by fighters of a Somali irredentist group, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), into Somali state in Ethiopia's southeast, armed with sophisticated weapons and equipment largely supplied by Eritrea.

Post-Election Political Repression

In June and November 2005 at least 10,000 people were arrested in Addis Ababa during protests against the results of the May elections. Most were detained for more than a month without judicial hearing and then released, but hundreds were transferred to a prison camp close to Addis Ababa. In March 2006 almost 400 of these prisoners were released; it is unclear how many others remain detained.

Following the November 2005 events the government arrested 76 opposition politicians, journalists, and civil society activists, including the newly elected mayor of Addis Ababa, Berhanu Nega, and newly elected parliamentarians. It accused them of treason and genocide, as well as intentionally using violence or unlawful means to change the “constitutional order,” obstructing government operations, organizing armed violence, and impairing “the defensive power of the State.” The treason and genocide charges are non-bailable, capital offenses, allowing the government to keep the defendants jailed for long periods before judicial verdict. The government brought similar charges against 55 other defendants, 35 in absentia, including five Voice of America reporters in the United States; the charges against the VOA reporters were later dismissed. In March 2006 the government arrested 32 others, including elected members of the Addis Ababa city council and a newspaper publisher, and accused them of the same crimes.

The treason trial began in May 2006, but recessed for two months in August and September, and presentation of the prosecution case was still in its early stages at this writing. Except for three civil society activists, the defendants refused to defend themselves, declaring the trial a sham.

Suppression of Free Expression and Attacks on Civil Society

Following the 2005 elections the government sharply reversed a liberalizing trend and subjected independent newspapers and their editors, publishers, and reporters to renewed harassment, intimidation, and criminal charges solely because of their reporting and editorials. In addition to the 18 journalists facing treason and genocide charges, journalists were convicted under the pre-1991 military government press law, which makes alleged defamation and the printing of “false” information criminal offenses.

Beginning in September 2006, security forces detained individuals caught with copies of a political manifesto by imprisoned Mayor Berhanu published in Uganda after the manuscript was smuggled out of prison. Also arrested were people found to have copies of an anonymous civil disobedience “calendar” containing pictures of the “treason” defendants and calls to non-violent action, such as boycotts of

government-controlled businesses, to win their release. The government blocked access to internet blogs critical of its policies.

The government has long tried unsuccessfully to outlaw the Ethiopian Teachers Association, the largest independent membership organization in the country. ETA's president was one of those charged with "treason" (but avoided imprisonment by being outside the country); the chair of ETA's Addis Ababa branch was also named as a defendant and is jailed. In September the government arrested two ETA officers after ETA had complained to the International Labour Organization of unlawful interference with its ability to represent its members.

Continuing Abuses in the Countryside

Authorities in Oromia state continued to use exaggerated concerns about armed insurgency and terrorism to justify the torture, imprisonment, and sustained harassment of their critics, including school children. In late 2005 and in 2006 federal and regional police in Oromia engaged in mass arrests, often in nighttime raids. Those arrested were informally accused of being supporters of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), a clandestine armed rebel group, but detainees were also accused of being supporters of the Oromo National Congress (ONC), a registered opposition political party that won seats in the 2005 elections. Most of those arrested were released after having been held for some weeks and forced to sign statements disavowing the ONC as a condition for release.

Local officials used precinct (*kebele*) "social courts" run by government-party appointees without legal training to detain farmers who voiced support for recognized opposition parties. Local and regional officials also subjected the rural population to intense levels of surveillance. Farmers who were deemed politically unreliable were denied fertilizer and other agricultural aids over which the government exercises monopoly control; they were also subject to imprisonment for debt or eviction from their farms (the government owns all land). In Amhara state, *kebele* officials played key roles in identifying known or presumed supporters of opposition parties and led federal police to these persons' homes at night, where the police beat and sometimes arrested them.

Abuses by the Armed Forces

The government has taken no meaningful action to address widespread atrocities committed by Ethiopian military forces in Gambella state, bordering Sudan. A government-sponsored commission of inquiry set up to investigate December 2003 violence in Gambella resulted in a whitewash. Although the scale of abuses in Gambella moderated in 2005-06, extrajudicial killings, rapes, beatings, and arbitrary arrests by armed forces personnel still occurred.

Reports of extrajudicial executions and torture also emerged from Somali state, but access to the region has been restricted by the military and by the ONLF insurgency, making these reports impossible to confirm.

Performance of the Judiciary

In high-profile cases, courts show little independence or concern for defendants' procedural rights. The two-month recess in the treason trial in August-September 2006, coupled with frequent shorter adjournments, ensured the defendants' prolonged detention. The trial judges put off addressing defense objections to evidence and ignored claims of serious mistreatment by prison authorities.

Although criminal courts in Ethiopia have some independence with respect to less prominent cases, the judiciary often acts only after unreasonably long delays, sometimes because of the courts' workloads, more often because of excessive judicial deference to bad faith prosecution requests for time to search for evidence of a crime.

Leaders of the traditional Oromo self-help organization Mecha Tulama, arrested in 2004 and accused of supporting the OLF and of organizing a grenade attack at Addis Ababa University, remained incarcerated as of late 2006, their trial yet to begin. Other Oromo detainees have been held for eight years without judicial resolution. Fourteen years after the overthrow of the former military government (the Derg), more than a thousand of its former officials still remain jailed awaiting trial.

Human Rights Defenders

Ethiopia has only one nationwide human rights organization, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO). Government officials routinely accuse the organization of working to advance an anti-government political agenda and its staff is subjected to harassment and intimidation. One investigator was charged in absentia in the treason trial. While EHRCO was not forced to close, it was far less active in 2006.

The Oromo-focused Human Rights League, having been allowed to register in 2005 shortly before the elections after years of litigation, remains inactive.

Key International Actors

International criticism of government repression, while robust, resulted in no significant actions. Ethiopia is considered an essential partner of the United States and its allies in their “war on terror,” all the more so after the Islamic Courts’ consolidation of power in Somalia. The United States expressed dismay about post-election repression, but Ethiopia remained the US’s biggest sub-Saharan-Africa aid beneficiary. In December 2005 the World Bank and the United Kingdom announced they would withhold direct budgetary support, but compensated in 2006 with even larger sums to local governments for health, water, rural development, and education programs. Those local governments are effectively controlled by the central government.

Two European Union diplomats were expelled from Ethiopia on October 20, 2006, after being caught attempting to cross into Kenya with two Ethiopian nationals. One of those detained with the EU diplomats was human rights lawyer Yalemzewd Bekele, who was working for the European Commission in Ethiopia. Bekele was arrested but subsequently released without charge.

For information on the international peacekeeping force, the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), see the chapter on Eritrea.