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Immigration and
Refugee Board of Canada

Commission de l'immigration
et du statut de réfugié du Canada

Ethiopia: Treatment of members of the opposition parties and of their relatives, particularly those of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), by government authorities (2008-2009)

Treatment of relatives of members of the opposition

In a report published on 5 May 2009, Amnesty International (AI) called on the Ethiopian government to divulge the names and detention sites of at least 35 individuals who were allegedly arrested for political reasons on 24 April 2009. Many of those individuals are believed to have been arrested for their alleged involvement in planning an attack on the government (AI 5 May 2009). According to the Deputy Director of AI's Africa program, [AI official English version] "[s]everal may have been detained solely for their family ties to men who have expressed political opposition to the government" (*ibid.*). According to AI, some of the detainees may have been arrested because of their family ties with members of opposition group Ginbot 7; that seems to be the case of Berhanu Nega's cousin and Andargachew Tsige's father (*ibid.*).

Treatment of members of the opposition

Several sources consulted by the Research Directorate reported cases of harassment and arrests of political opponents in Ethiopia (US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 3; HRW Jan. 2009; Freedom House 2009; EWHRA 2009).

In a report on the situation of human rights in Ethiopia presented to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council during the Universal Periodic Review of Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Women's Human Rights Alliance (EWHRA) states that, since the 2005 elections, there have been "credible and continuous" reports of harassment and threats against political groups (2009). According to EWHRA, under the guise of the "Global War on Terror", the Ethiopian government has imprisoned, tortured and even killed members of the opposition parties" (2009). In a report published in January 2009, Human Rights Watch (HRW) indicates that government authorities regularly arrest political opponents and subject them "to torture, often reflexively accusing them of membership in 'anti-peace' or 'anti-people' organizations." According to the United States (US) Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008*, opposition parties reported

that, in 2008, their supporters were targeted by "frequent and systematic abuse and intimidation" by government security forces, particularly during the months leading up to the April 2008 elections (US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 2.b).

According to *Country Reports 2008*, members of opposition parties reported that people were being detained in small towns "for long periods without charge or access to a judge" (US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 1.d). For example, at a May 2008 wedding in Chilga District, Amhara Region, nine members of the All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP) were arrested and accused of holding an illegal political gathering; they were still being held in prison at the end of 2008 without bail, formal charges, or communication with their families (*ibid.*). *Country Reports 2008* also reports that Ethiopian authorities told opposition members to resign from their parties and to vote for the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) "if they wanted access to fertilizer, agricultural services, food relief, continued employment, and other benefits controlled by the government" (US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 3; see also Bloomberg 10 Nov. 2009).

Sources indicate that opposition parties boycotted the April 2008 elections because their candidates had been subject to intimidation (CPJ 10 Feb. 2009; Freedom House 2009) and arrests (*ibid.*). According to other sources consulted by the Research Directorate, Ethiopian opposition parties had announced that approximately 450 opposition members had been imprisoned "to discourage them from running in the May [2010] elections" (IPS 8 Dec. 2009; VOA 10 Nov. 2009; Reuters 3 Nov. 2009).

Country Reports 2008 indicates that during 2008, many political parties were forced to close their offices throughout the country and that members of the following parties are believed to have been arrested: United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ), Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) and the Oromo People's Congress (OPC) (US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 2.b).

In October and November 2008, 10 leaders of political opposition parties were arrested (US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 1.e). Among them were Bekele Jirata, Secretary General of the OFDM, who was accused of supporting the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) (AI 2009; IPS 14 Jan. 2009; US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 1.e) and, more specifically, of "promoting OLF terrorist activities, and financially supporting the OLF" (*ibid.*).

Several sources reported the arrest of opposition leader Birtukan Mideksa in December 2008 and the reinstatement of her sentence of life imprisonment (AI 2009; *Les Afriques* 20 Oct. 2009; RFI 11 Sept. 2009). In the aftermath of the violence that followed the 2005 elections, Birtukan Mideksa and 30 other opposition party members were arrested and released after spending one year in prison (APA 30 Dec. 2008). The Ethiopian government charged her with violating the terms of her release in 2007 (*Les Afriques* 20 Oct. 2009). Birtukan Mideksa is the leader of the UDJ, the party created after the abolition of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) (Reuters 3 Nov. 2009; AI 2009).

According to EWHRA, although they were released, the people considered to be dissidents are still under surveillance (2009). AI reported cases in which many released prisoners faced harassment and intimidation, which prompted some to leave the country (AI 2009). For example, a CUD supporter "who had suffered harassment since his release from prison in 2007, fled Ethiopia ... after he was severely beaten by unknown assailants" (*ibid.*).

Another former CUD leader, Berhanu Nega, who now lives in the US, founded an opposition party called "May 15th" (Reuters 3 Nov. 2009) or "Ginbot 7" (CPJ 10 Feb. 2009). Considered [translation] "a terrorist group" by the Ethiopian authorities (PANA 2 May 2009), the movement [translation] "called for a battle against the government 'by every means possible'" (CPJ 10 Feb. 2009). Sources consulted by the Research Directorate indicate that, in November 2009, 26 individuals were convicted of conspiring against the government and 5 others were acquitted (AFP 19 Nov. 2009; AP 19 Nov. 2009). Those individuals, mostly military personnel suspected of having ties with Ginbot 7, were arrested in April 2009 (AFP 19 Nov. 2009; PANA 2 May 2009; AI 5 May 2009). Accused of being the mastermind behind the conspiracy, opposition leader Berhanu Nega has always maintained that [translation] "it was a 'frame-up' and that he had 'nothing to do' with the

matter" (AFP 19 Nov. 2009). Berhanu Nega was convicted in absentia (AP 19 Nov. 2009).

According to several sources, an anti-terrorist law is currently under consideration in the Ethiopian parliament (Front Line 19 June 2009; HRW 30 June 2009; EWHRA 2009). According to Front Line, a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to protecting human rights,

[Official Front Line English version]

[t]he draft proclamation contains several provisions that raise serious concerns, particularly in relation to the definition of terrorist activity; the powers granted to investigatory bodies; and modification to court procedures and fair trial guarantees. Firstly, the definition of terrorist activity contained in Article 3 is extremely broad and vague and can be applied to activities totally unrelated to terrorism (Front Line 19 June 2009).

According to HRW, the law could be used to prosecute peaceful political protestors and, in some cases, to "impose lengthy prison terms and even the death penalty as a punishment for damaging property or disrupting public services" (30 June 2009). Additional information on this law could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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