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Ethiopia: Students at risk of torture as crisis deepens

After three days of mass arrests and shootings of demonstrators in Addis Ababa, leaving at least 26 dead and over 100 injured, Amnesty International today said that over 1,500 students and other demonstrators are at risk of torture. Further arrests are reportedly continuing in Addis Ababa and in other towns where student demonstrations took place.

The organization condemned the excessive use of force by the police, who used live ammunition against mainly peaceful protestors -- although some threw stones -- and brutally beat them.

"The excessive and indiscriminate use of force is in contravention of international human rights standards," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Amnesty International's Africa Programme Director. "These standards clearly state that police and security forces may only resort to deliberate lethal use of firearms when strictly necessary to protect life."

"We call on the Ethiopian government to halt the police violence and set up an independent and impartial commission of inquiry into the killings that have already taken place, and to make those findings public."

One female student, Shebray Delelegne, was killed when police reportedly opened fire on people attempting to block police vehicles carrying detained students. Six others were wounded in the incident. The death was called an "accident" by officials who gave no further details.

Amnesty International also expressed serious concern for the fate of Chernet Tadesse, 31, a human rights defender and investigator for the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, who was arrested yesterday while collecting information on the arrests and deaths. His whereabouts are not known and Amnesty International believes he is at risk of torture or ill-treatment. The whereabouts after arrest yesterday of Andargachew Tsige, 48, are also unknown. He is a former deputy Mayor of Addis Ababa, a United Kingdom-based resident and author of a recent book criticising the government.

"We are very concerned for the safety of the detained students and others, who were, in most cases, peacefully demonstrating on their university campus or in the streets as a way of expressing their opinions," said Kolawole Olaniyan. "Many were beaten with batons and rifle butts and then taken away by the police. The Ethiopian government must now ensure their safety and give them access to their families and legal counsel. It should either take them to court within the prescribed 48 hours and guarantee prompt and fair trials, or release them without delay."

Amnesty International fears that the detained Addis Ababa University students, who are being held incommunicado without charge, are being beaten, forced to do harsh exercises, and denied adequate food and medical treatment. Although police have said some have been released, most are believed to be still detained in police camps such as Sendafa police training college, 40 kms north of Addis Ababa.

Background

The students were protesting the announcement of the provisional results of the parliamentary elections of 15 May by the National Election Board of Ethiopia. The protests defied the Prime Minister's one month post-election ban on demonstrations. The students were supporting opposition demands for an investigation into alleged voting irregularities, including reported arrests and beatings of opposition candidates. Provisional results of the parliamentary elections indicated a majority for Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front coalition.

Similar student protests and arrests also took place and may be continuing, for example at Debub University in Awassa in the Southern Region, Jimma University in the Oromia Region; Gondar and Bahar Dar Universities in the north; and Alemayehu University in Harar in the east.

Several opposition party members are also reported to have been beaten and arrested in Addis Ababa, particularly members of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), although some have been

released. Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of Lidetu Ayalew, the CUD public relations officer, who is under house arrest in his office, and being denied food or visitors. The Information Minister and the police accused the CUD of instigating the student protests and inciting violence. The CUD denies this and maintains it is a peaceful opposition party.

Public Document

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