

Court Drops Charges Against Five Voice of America Journalists

Committee to Protect Journalists (New York)

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An Ethiopian court today granted a state prosecutor's request to drop charges of treason and genocide against five Voice of America journalists and another radio journalist being tried in absentia.

"We welcome the dropping of these ridiculous charges against VOA staff," said Ann Cooper, Executive Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists. "But they should never have been charged in the first place. We call on the government to release all journalists imprisoned for their work in Ethiopia immediately."

The journalists were indicted along with dozens of opposition leaders and civil society activists following anti-government protests last year.

This month, a CPJ delegation met with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and asked for the release of the 16 journalists currently in jail in Ethiopia. Fourteen of them are facing anti-state charges. The CPJ delegation also visited the prison where most journalists are held, and met with some of those charged with treason and genocide. The journalists all professed their innocence. They include Serkalem Fassil, 26, who is five months pregnant.

No reason was given for the dismissal of charges against the five Ethiopian journalists who work for VOA in Washington. CPJ sources said U.S. diplomatic pressure may have played a part. VOA, which is funded by the U.S. government, broadcasts into Ethiopia in the local language, Amharic. Charges were also dropped against a journalist for the Washington-based radio station Netsanet Le Ethiopia Radio, which is available on the Internet and is strongly critical of the Ethiopian government. Charges remain, however, against several other exiled journalists charged in absentia.

The government cracked down on the private press after opposition demonstrations in November against alleged poll rigging in May elections that returned Meles to power. At least 46 people were killed in the November clashes with security forces, international news agencies reported. In similar protests in June, at least 42 people died. The court will continue to hear cases against some 100 opposition leaders, aid workers and journalists on charges that stem from the November violence.