

Ethiopian bloggers jailed 'for trying to topple the government'

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Twenty Ethiopians, including a prominent blogger and opposition figures were jailed for between eight years to life on Friday on charges of conspiring with rebels to topple the government.



Defence lawyer, Abebe Guta, who represented 24 people found guilty of terrorism in Ethiopia, talks to reporters at a court in Addis Ababa Photo: AFP

Ethiopia, a major recipient of Western aid, has said it is fighting separatist rebel movements and armed groups backed by its arch-foe Eritrea.

But rights groups say the Horn of Africa country, sandwiched between volatile Somalia and Sudan, is using broad anti-terrorism legislation to crack down on dissent and media freedoms. Addis Ababa denies the charge.

Blogger and journalist Eskinder Nega, who was arrested last year and accused of trying to incite violence with a series of online articles, was jailed for 18 years.

Five other exiled journalists and a blogger were sentenced in absentia to between 15 years to life.

Opposition official Andualem Arage was jailed for life. Two other prominent opposition figures Berhanu Nega and Andargachew Tsige, who are out of the country, also received life sentences.

"The court has given due considerations to the charges and the sentences are appropriate," Judge Endeshaw Adane said during the proceedings in Addis Ababa.

The 20 were charged last year, most of them in absentia, with six counts including conspiracy to dismantle the constitutional order, recruitment and training for terror acts and aiding Eritrea and a rebel group to disrupt security.

They were also accused of belonging to Ginbot 7, a group branded a "terrorist" organisation by the Ethiopian government.

Another four people charged alongside them were not sentenced on Friday and were being treated as a separate case, said court officials.

Exiled opposition leader Berhanu Nega, was also jailed for life on charges of treason in the aftermath of 2005's disputed parliamentary election, but was later pardoned.