

Ethiopia's human rights conditions remain harsh, says UN

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ADDIS ABABA (Reuters) - The human rights situation in Ethiopia, where scores of people were killed in post-election violence last year, was "under a lot of strain", a top U.N. official said on Wednesday.

U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour also criticised conditions in a prison where opposition leaders were being held pending their trial on genocide and treason charges.

"The human rights situation in Ethiopia at present is under a lot of strain," she told a news conference at the end of a three-day visit to the Horn of Africa country.

The leaders were among thousands arrested after two bouts of violence in which at least 82 people were killed last year as protesters clashed with security forces over the results of a May 15 poll the opposition says were rigged.

Arbour said she visited Kaliti prison and held talks with six opposition members including Hailu Shawel, the chairman of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and internationally known human rights campaigner Mesfin Wolde Mariam.

She described the prison housing 3,000 prisoners -- convicted criminals and inmates on remand -- as "very rudimentary where the general living conditions are very harsh".

"I was particularly struck and distressed to see in the women's quarter of the prison ... children from infants to five-year-olds, whose mothers are incarcerated, running around in prison," she said.

Arbour, who met several Ethiopian officials including Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, said Meles offered no promise of leniency towards the detained opposition leaders. If convicted of treason, they could face the death penalty.

"I received no guarantees of (leniency) from the government," she said.

The post-election crackdown has tarnished Meles' democratic credentials prompting donors including Britain and the European Union to halt direct budgetary aid to sub-Saharan Africa's second most populous country.

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