

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: AFR 25/006/2005 (Public)

News Service No: 111

29 April 2005

Ethiopia: Human rights should be on the election agenda

Amnesty International is calling for the 15 May 2005 elections to be a new start for respect and protection of human rights in Ethiopia

In a report published on 29 April 2005 about the imminent Ethiopian elections and human rights issues, Amnesty International urges the government and its security forces, election officials and all political parties, to make clear commitments to respect and protect the human rights of all Ethiopians during the elections, including the human rights of women. The organization calls for impartial investigation by the authorities and election observers of continuing reports of human rights abuses against members of opposition parties.

On 15 May 2005 Ethiopians will elect a new federal parliament and regional and city councils, with elections in the Somali Region to be held in August. It will

be the third general election under the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Amnesty International is not an election observer, either in Ethiopia or elsewhere, but it calls for human rights to be protected in the election process and for human rights issues to feature prominently in it.

Amnesty International's representatives visited Ethiopia in February-March 2005 to assess the human rights situation impartially and independently in relation to the upcoming elections. They met the chair of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, and the National Human Rights Commissioner. They also met opposition party representatives, UN officials, diplomatic representatives, Ethiopian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), journalists, women's organizations and other human rights defenders.

Amnesty International's representatives visited certain rural areas to investigate allegations of election-related human rights violations. In East Gojjam in the Amhara Region, two opposition party members had recently been killed by local government militia, and in the Southern Region there were reports of arrests and intimidation of opposition members. Opposition parties have recently reported two more killings and many arrests of opposition supporters in these regions, which Amnesty International is unable so far to confirm.

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition and its affiliated parties control the current federal parliament and regional and city councils, having gained over 95 percent of all seats in the previous elections in 2000. In the May 2000 elections, there were several reliable reports of election-related human rights abuses.

In the current elections, the contest is between the EPRDF group and two opposition coalitions, the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) and the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), and independent candidates. The Prime Minister has said that the EPRDF will work alongside opposition parties and the international community to ensure a "flawless election". Opposition parties claims their members have encountered human rights and politically-motivated restrictions on their activities in recent months and during the election campaign.

The government has allowed election observation by invited or accredited election observers. In addition to the diplomatic community, there will be international election observers from the European Union, the African Union and the Carter Centre in the USA. However, not all those who want to observe, assist or study the elections have been accepted by the government. It is still unclear whether Ethiopian NGOs and human rights groups, who are currently engaged in voter education, will be accredited as election observers.

The elections take place against a background of widespread violations of human rights in Ethiopia in recent years. Amnesty International has been concerned about the prolonged detention without charge or trial of several thousand people arrested for political reasons, particularly on account of suspected links to armed opposition groups in the long-running armed conflicts in the Oromia and Somali Regions. There have been cases of imprisonment of prisoners of conscience, and reports of torture, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions. Journalists of the private print media have been frequently imprisoned under the 1992 Press Law. No journalist is currently in prison under this law, but over 20 journalists who were earlier freed on bail might yet be brought to trial. A new Press Law is being prepared which could be used to arrest, try and imprison editors and reporters in violation of their right to freedom of opinion and expression. Human rights defenders have also been at risk.

In Gambella Region in south-western Ethiopia, the right to freedom of opinion and assembly is still severely affected by the killing of large numbers of members of the Anuak ethnic group (or "nationality") by civilian mobs and soldiers over three days in December 2003. In March 2005, six soldiers were charged with involvement in the killings.

The report concludes with Amnesty International's recommendations to the government, election observers and political parties:

The government should make a clear public statement that human rights violations in the election context will not be tolerated. The security forces at all levels including local militia should act with due impartiality to protect voters' rights and the rule of law.

Election observers, both international and local, should include a human rights component in their mandate. They should observe and report impartially, accurately and publicly on any election-related violations of human rights, including the human rights of women, and bring these to the attention of the appropriate authorities for investigation and prosecution of those responsible.

All political parties and candidates, whether pro-government, opposition or independent, should publicly commit themselves to promoting and protecting human rights, participating in the elections peacefully and fairly, and not tolerating any abuses by their supporters.

For a copy of the report: *Ethiopia: The 15 May 2005 elections and human rights -- recommendations to the government, election observers and political parties*, please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/eng afr250022005>