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Ethiopia: Prosecutor demands death sentences for prisoners of conscience

Reacting to today's court proceedings in Ethiopia in which the prosecutor demanded death sentences for all 38 defendants in a 14-month-long political trial, Amnesty International expressed shock and called for the court to reject the prosecutor's demand.

The court told the defendants to submit pleas of mitigation in the next three days. Sentences are expected to be passed on 16 July.

The group of 38 includes two women, journalists, a prominent human rights defender, and leaders of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) party. All have been in prison since November 2005. During the prosecution case they had refused to submit a defence on the grounds that they did not expect a fair trial. After the judges ruled that they had a case to answer, they considered submitting a defence. However, on 11 June the judges reportedly cut short their requests concerning preparing a defence, and convicted them as charged.

The 38 had been convicted of "outrages against the Constitution" and "impairing the defensive power of the state," with five of them also convicted of "leading, preparing or inciting armed opposition." They had earlier been acquitted of "treason" and "attempted genocide," but the prosecutor has appealed against this earlier court decision.

Amnesty International said that it is shocking that the defendants are now facing the possibility of execution. On the basis of the information available to Amnesty International, most -- if not all -- are prisoners of conscience imprisoned on account of their non-violent opinions, who have not used or advocated violence. Amnesty International has been calling for their unconditional release.

There have been several unconfirmed reports that the Ethiopian government is considering releasing the 38 on certain conditions -- as well as some other CUD members still on trial -- in the coming days.

For several months during the trial, the imprisoned CUD leaders had been reported by various sources to have been engaged in private communications with government representatives through an Ethiopian mediator.

It has been unofficially reported that they may be granted a "pardon" and released in exchange for having signed a statement, along with other CUD members still on trial, that is said to be an admission of some responsibility for the violence that took place during demonstrations in June and November 2005 following disputed elections. During the protests, 193 demonstrators were shot dead by the security forces and six police officers killed by demonstrators.

A government official has said that any such pardon could only be granted through the presidential amnesty or pardon process after the end of the trial.

Ten other defendants in the same trial who are presenting a defence are due to appear in court on 12 July. They include civil society activists Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie, who are prisoners of conscience.

Another separate trial of CUD members -- including Kifle Tigeneh, an elected CUD Member of Parliament -- has been adjourned to 29 October. The defendants in this trial also face possible death sentences.

Amnesty International has been monitoring the trial to assess whether it is consistent with recognized international standards of fair trial. The trial has also been observed by the European Union. Amnesty International plans to attend the sentencing hearing and defence case.

Background

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases and without exception believing it to be a violation of the right to life and the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. The death penalty legitimizes an irreversible act of violence by the state and will inevitably claim innocent victims. Amnesty International therefore demands unconditional and worldwide abolition of the death penalty.