

EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK

Public Statement

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KAMPALA: EHAHRD-Net WELCOMES ACQUITTAL OF ETHIOPIAN JOURNALISTS, URGES COURT TO FREE OTHER HRDs STILL DETAINED

The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (EHAHRD-Net) welcomes the news about the acquittal of Ethiopian journalists who have been under detention or in exile since November 2005. The journalists were arrested over their reporting on the violence that occurred in the capital Addis Ababa and other parts of the country in the aftermath of the May 2005 General Elections. The journalists were handed anti-state charges of which if found guilty, could have faced the death sentence. Other charges included treason and charges of inciting genocide.

According to information received from Network members in Ethiopia, those acquitted include; Publisher Sisay Agena of *Ethiop* and *Abay*; Publisher Serkalem Fassil and Columnist Eskinder Nega of *Menilik*, *Asqual*, and *Satanaw*; Editor-in-Chief Nardos Meaza of *Satanaw*; Publisher Zekarias Tesfaye and Deputy Editor Dereje Habtewold of *Netsanet*; Deputy Editor Feleke Tibebe of *Hadar*; and Publisher Fasil Yenealem of *Addis Zena* were acquitted of three criminal charges and ordered released from Kality prison. The publications have been banned since the crackdown. Kifle Mulat, the exiled President of the banned Ethiopian Free press Journalists Association (EFJA), was also acquitted of the single charge of “outrage to the Constitution and constitutional order” over his organization’s criticism of the Government crackdown. The Network has also been informed that at least nine (9) other journalists still remain in detention.

“Whereas as a Network we welcome the court verdict, we wish to urge the Ethiopian Government to desist from future intimidation of the media. Those journalists and other human rights defenders still under detention must also be freed to continue their duties. The Government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi must come out and openly pronounce itself on its commitment to observe media freedom, which is an essential component of any democratic society,” says Hassan Shire Sheikh, Chairperson EHAHRDP/Net.

Background

EHAHRDP/Net started an advocacy campaign on behalf of the detained Ethiopian journalists soon after their detention. The Network published a number of public statements on the case, and also petitioned the Ethiopian Prime Minister over the same. This campaign came as the first challenge to the Network during its inaugural conference held at Entebbe Uganda , in November 2005, attended by over 45 human rights defenders

from the East and Horn of Africa sub-region. Kifle Mulat, President of the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association along with other human rights defenders (HRDs) from Ethiopia, were unable to return home after the conference as their names appeared on the police list of “most wanted” persons.

It is therefore a great joy that these committed HRDs have been acquitted, though this joy remains incomplete as long as their colleagues remain detained.

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