

PUBLIC

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UA 04/07 Fear of torture or ill-treatment/"disappearance"/prisoners of conscience

ETHIOPIA Tilahun Ayalew (m)]
 Anteneh Getnet (m)] officials of the Ethiopian Teachers' Association (ETA)
 Meqcha Mengistu (m)]

The three men named above are prominent members of Ethiopia's main teachers' trade union, which has been critical of the government. Tilahun Ayalew and Anteneh Getnet are reported to be in custody, and are believed to have been tortured. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the non-violent expression of their opinions and trade union activities.

Tilahun Ayalew was detained on 14 December, and allegedly tortured. He is reportedly held incommunicado by police at the headquarters of the Central Investigation Bureau (*Maikelawi*) in the capital, Addis Ababa, where prisoners have allegedly been tortured. Anteneh Getnet has reportedly been held at the same place since 29 December, and allegedly tortured. Both men have been produced in court, but not charged or given access to legal counsel or their relatives.

The third ETA official, Meqcha Mengistu, has not been seen since 15 December and is believed to have been detained by the police. He had allegedly been under police surveillance for several days prior to his "disappearance". His relatives and friends have made enquiries as to his whereabouts but the authorities have denied all knowledge. He is believed to be in secret custody and at risk of torture.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The ETA is the largest trade union in Ethiopia, with half a million members. It is affiliated to the worldwide trade union umbrella organisation the International Trade Union Confederation, and to the global federation of teachers' trade unions Education International. The ETA has been critical of government education policies, including regional language teaching policies and teachers' conditions of service. The government has taken legal action to close the organisation, in a long-running case which the courts have yet to finally rule on. The authorities have also attempted to undermine the ETA by setting up a rival pro-government union with the same name, closing down the ETA's headquarters in Addis Ababa and attempting to freeze their funds. Hundreds of teachers and ETA members across the country have been detained or arbitrarily dismissed since the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991, reportedly because they failed to support the party.

The ETA issued statements criticizing the government in the aftermath of the May 2005 general elections, which saw the EPRDF returned to power amid opposition allegations of vote-rigging and fraud. Nearly 200 opposition party supporters were reportedly killed by the security forces during demonstrations in June and November 2005; six police officers were also killed by demonstrators during the protests. Thousands of opposition party members, human rights defenders, journalists and others were arrested during and after the demonstrations. Many have been released, but now 111 people are on trial before the Federal High Court in Addis Ababa on charges including "high treason", "outrages against the Constitution" and "genocide". These charges can carry the death penalty.

Kassahun Kebede, the chair of the Addis Ababa branch of the ETA, is one of four human rights defenders and civil society activists charged with "outrages against the Constitution". Amnesty International considers all four to be prisoners of conscience who should be released immediately and unconditionally. Also on trial is ETA general secretary Dr Taye Woldesemayat, who was abroad at the time and is being tried in his absence. The prosecution case was completed in December 2006 and the trial has been adjourned until 19

February 2007. (For further information, please see the AI report *Ethiopia: Prisoners of conscience on trial for treason: opposition party leaders, human rights defenders and journalists*, AFR 25/013/2006, May 2006.)

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing concern at the detention of Tilahun Ayalew and Anteneh Getnet;
- calling on the authorities to investigate reports that both men have been tortured, and urging them to allow the men immediate access to their relatives, legal representation and any medical treatment they may require;
- expressing concern that Meqcha Mengistu may have been secretly detained by the police, putting him at risk of torture;
- calling on the authorities to state publicly whether Meqcha Mengistu is in government custody, and if he is, to provide assurances that he is not being tortured and to either release him or charge him promptly with a recognisably criminal offence;
- calling on the authorities to release Tilahun Ayalew and Anteneh Getnet immediately and unconditionally, as Amnesty International believes they are prisoners of conscience, held solely for exercising their right to peacefully express their opinions and to work as trade unionists.

APPEALS TO:

Minister of Justice

Mr Assefa Kesito, Ministry of Justice, PO Box 1370, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: +251 11 5517775

+251 11 5520874

Email: ministry-justice@telecom.net.et

Salutation: Dear Minister

Federal Commissioner of Police

Mr Workneh Gebeyehu, Ministry of Federal Affairs, PO Box 5068, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Salutation: Dear Commissioner

COPIES TO:

Prime Minister

His Excellency Meles Zenawi, Office of the Prime Minister, PO Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: +251 11 1552020

Minister of Education

Mr Sintayehu Woldemikael, Ministry of Education, PO Box 1367, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: +251 11 155 08 77

and to diplomatic representatives of Ethiopia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 15 February 2007.