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Ethiopia: Government continues to target peaceful Muslim protest movement

The Ethiopian authorities are committing human rights violations in response to the ongoing Muslim protest movement in the country. Large numbers of protestors have been arrested, many of whom remain in detention. There are also numerous reports of police using excessive force against peaceful demonstrators. Key figures within the movement have been charged with terrorism offences. Most of those arrested and charged appear to have been targeted solely because of their participation in a peaceful protest movement.

Tens of thousands of Muslims have participated in regular peaceful protests throughout 2012, opposing alleged government interference in Islamic affairs. Protestors accuse the government of attempting to impose the teachings of the Al Ahabash sect of Islam on the Muslim community and of interference in elections for the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs.

Ethiopia's Constitution prohibits state involvement in religious affairs. The Constitution also contains an expansive provision on the right to peacefully protest, which is routinely flouted by the authorities.

Allegations of excessive use of force by police

An incident that occurred in Gerba town, in the South Wollo zone of the Amhara region, on Sunday 21 October -during which police officers fired on civilians, killing at least three people and injuring others - raises serious questions about the use of deadly force against protestors. In speaking about the incident to the media, the government confirmed the three deaths but claimed that protestors had attacked a police station armed with machetes and hand guns to try to secure the release of another protestor who had been arrested earlier in the day. The government also stated that a police officer was killed in the alleged attack. However, the protestors report that they had peacefully demanded and secured the release of the arrested person during the morning of 21 October and the protest had subsequently dispersed. Later in the day federal police, called in as reinforcements, arrived at the mosque in Gerba town and opened fire, targeting people coming out of the mosque as well as others in the vicinity. One man told Amnesty International that he had seen a police officer killed in the ensuing violence. Other witnesses said they could not confirm any police deaths. An unknown number of arrests are reported to have taken place during the incident on 21 October and more arrests reportedly occurred in the aftermath of the incident, including the arrests of people who spoke to the media about events.

Amnesty International has previously reported on similar, incidents of police allegedly using excessive force. In July Amnesty International called for an investigation into two incidents – at Awalia and Anwar mosques in Addis Ababa – in relation to which numerous allegations were made about excessive use of force by police, including firing live ammunition and beating protestors in the street and in detention, resulting in many injuries among protestors. However, no investigation has taken place to Amnesty International's knowledge.

Amnesty International is also calling for an independent investigation into an incident that took place in Asasa town, Arsi district, Oromia region in April in which the police reportedly shot dead at least four people. Reports about the incident from the government and from those involved differ widely. The violence is reported to have occurred when the police attempted to arrest an Imam from the mosque. In statements to the press after the event, the government

stated that supporters of the Imam attacked the police station to try to secure his release. However, local sources told the media that the police had opened fire in the town when supporters tried to prevent the man's arrest. The government claimed the Imam had been preaching extremist ideology. However the protestors claim that the attempted arrest was because the Imam had refused to undergo 'training' in Al Ahabash ideology, which the government had made obligatory for Muslim preachers.

Use of Anti-Terrorism legislation against leaders of peaceful protest movement

On 29 October, 28 men and one woman were formally charged with 'terrorist acts' and 'planning..., incitement and attempt of terrorist acts' under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (2009) in relation to their involvement in the protest movement. Two Muslim organisations were also charged under the same law with 'rendering support to terrorism.' Those charged include nine members of the committee selected by the Muslim community to represent their grievances to the government, and one journalist, Yusuf Getachew, who works for the publication *Ye'Muslimoch Giday* (Muslim Affairs).

These individuals appear to have been arrested and charged solely because they exercised their human rights to freedom of expression and to participate in a peaceful protest movement. Since its introduction in 2009 the excessively broad Anti-Terrorism Proclamation has predominantly been used to prosecute dissenters and critics of the government, including journalists and members of political opposition parties.

At least 24 of those charged on 29 October were arrested in mid-July and have been held on remand under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, which allows for up to four months of investigative detention without charge. The defendants were detained illegally for the last five days before the charges were brought, after the police and prosecutors failed to turn up to a hearing on 24 October at which they were required to present charges and evidence, causing the judge to declare the case closed, according to one of the lawyers for the defendants. However, the judge did not order the release of the group, who were then brought to court on 29 October and charged.

A senior representative of the government told Amnesty International that the arrested individuals instigated violence and were trying to undermine the Constitution under the guise of religion. Similar statements from other senior members of the government have also been reported in the media. Amnesty International is concerned that, in a country where the government has significant influence over the courts, these comments may undermine the right of the accused to presumption of innocence.

The government has repeatedly attempted to paint the protest movement as violent and terrorist-related in statements to the media and in parliament. However, the vast majority of the protests are reported to be peaceful, and peaceful tactics have repeatedly been used by the protestors, including silent demonstrations and holding up white material, paper and ribbons as a sign of peaceful intent. While a few isolated incidents of violence have occurred, these have taken place during episodes where excessive police force is alleged. According to the accounts of the protestors, it was the actions of the police that triggered a violent response. Independent investigations are required to establish the course of events during these incidents.

Continued arrests and detention of peaceful protestors

Since July, when large numbers of arrests took place and incidents occurred at Awalia and Anwar mosques in Addis Ababa, protests have continued to take place in several regions, including in the towns of Dessie, Jimma, Harar, Shashemene, Adama, Bati, Kemise, and Robe. In addition to the original grievances of the movement, the protestors also demonstrated against the continued detention of members of the committee chosen to represent the Muslim

community's grievances to the government. Arrests, arbitrary detention and harassment of protestors are reported to have taken place in a number of locations.¹ Many of these reports have included allegations of police beating protestors, and the use of tear gas against peaceful demonstrations has been alleged in at least two locations.

Many demonstrations occurred in advance of elections for the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, which took place on 7 October. Although the long delay in holding the elections was one of the central grievances of the movement, the protestors raised several serious concerns in relation to the elections, including: the fact that the elections took place while their chosen representatives remained in detention; the level of control the government had over the poll; and the rejection of the protestors' long-standing demand that the elections should be held in mosques instead of in kebele (local administration) offices. Demonstrators also allege that the government was coercing voters in advance of the election, threatening the withdrawal of access to state resources and other repercussions for those who did not vote. In statements made to Amnesty International and to the media, members of the protest movement have reported that a significant proportion of the Muslim community boycotted the poll, although the government declared the elections a success.

It is not known how many protestors are now in detention. Hundreds of arrests have been made over recent months. Of the large numbers who were arrested around the two July incidents, as reported by Amnesty International on 25 July, many were detained for a few days and subsequently released. However, an unknown number remain in detention, in Maikelawi, Ziway and other detention centres.

Efforts to prevent reporting on the government's response to the protests

The government has sought to prevent reporting on the protest movement. Two colleagues of Yusuf Getachew from *Ye'Muslimoch Guday* fled the country after Yusuf was arrested and their own houses were searched. Neither *Ye'Muslimoch Guday* nor two other Muslim publications - weeklies *Selefiah* and *Sewtul Islam* - have been published since the July events. A correspondent for Voice of America was temporarily detained on 5 October in Addis Ababa while reporting on protests against the Supreme Council elections, and was told to delete any interviews she had recorded with protestors.

The response of the Ethiopian government to the protest movement has involved widespread violations of human rights. There has been almost no effort on the part of the authorities to engage with the protestors on their grievances or to put in place mechanisms for dialogue.

Amnesty International believes that the majority, if not all of those arrested, have been detained for exercising their right to peaceful protest, as protected under the Ethiopian Constitution and international law. The organization is calling on the Ethiopian authorities to release immediately and unconditionally any individuals who have been detained for their participation in protest actions. All detainees who remain in detention without charge must be brought swiftly before a judicial authority. Where credible evidence of a criminal offence exists people must be charged promptly, or should be immediately and unconditionally released. All detainees must have their rights in detention upheld, be provided with full access to legal representatives, medical care if they require it and to family members.

The reports of police use of excessive force against protestors in Gerba on 21 October, in Addis Ababa in July and in Asasa in April, must be properly investigated through processes that meet international standards in relation to impartiality and credibility. If enough admissible evidence of crimes is found, suspected perpetrators should be prosecuted in effective trial proceedings that meet international standards.

¹ These incidents have been reported in local and Diaspora media, on social media sites, and in information submitted directly to Amnesty International.