

ETHIOPIA

FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA

Head of state: Girma Wolde-Giorgis

Head of government: Meles Zenawi

Death penalty: retentionist

International Criminal Court: not signed

Police shot dead over 230 people and detained several hundred more in Oromia and the southern region in connection with demonstrations, mostly peaceful. Many human rights violations including torture, rape and extrajudicial execution were reported, particularly in conflict zones in the Oromia and Somali regions. Journalists and government critics were arrested and some sent for trial. A prominent prisoner of conscience convicted following an unfair trial was released after his 15-year sentence was reduced on appeal. Several thousand people remained in long-term detention without charge or trial on suspicion of supporting armed opposition groups. Prison conditions were harsh and many prisoners were held incommunicado or were feared to have "disappeared". Many trials on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity of officials of the former Dergue government were concluded, leaving over 1,000 others on trial or awaiting trial. Several death sentences were imposed but no executions were reported.

Background

The UN and aid agencies appealed for funds for humanitarian aid as famine threatened the lives of 14 million people at the end of the year.

The National Human Rights Commission and Ombudsman's Office legislated for in 2000 had not been formed by the end of 2002.

In April, following a peace treaty signed in December 2000 ending a two-year border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission at The Hague in the Netherlands delivered its ruling on the border issue. Both sides had agreed in advance to accept the ruling but disagreements remained at the end of the year, delaying border demarcation.

The mandate of the UN Military Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), administering a buffer zone between the two countries and demining the area, was extended into 2003 by the UN Security Council. Exchanges of prisoners of war and civilian internees proceeded under the auspices of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). In November Ethiopia returned to Eritrea 1,568 Eritrean prisoners of war and civilian internees, the last remaining war prisoners wishing to return home. It renewed calls for the return of Colonel Bezabih Petros and several other Ethiopian prisoners of war not yet returned by Eritrea.

In December Ethiopia ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Armed conflict

In continuing regional conflicts, Ethiopia supported the Alliance of Eritrean National Forces armed group, while Eritrea supported Ethiopian armed opponents – the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) fighting in Oromia region, and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) fighting in the Somali region in alliance with the OLF and *Al-Itihad Al-Islamiya* (Islamic Unity). In these and other lesser conflicts in Ethiopia, civilians were frequently the victims of arbitrary detention, extrajudicial executions, and torture, including rape, by government forces in reprisals for attacks and casualties.

There were some incidents of intercommunal fighting resulting in dozens of deaths and the displacement of thousands of people. Scores of people of the opposed Nuer and Anuak communities were killed in Itang town in Gambela region in the southwest in July 2002. Some arrests were made in connection with the killings but no one had been brought to trial by the end of the year.

Ethnic clashes among Sudanese refugees in Fugnido camp in Gambela region in November left over 40 dead and scores wounded.

Journalists

The government continued to harass, threaten, arrest and jail independent journalists, although less than in 2001. They were accused under the Press Law of offences such as defamation, spreading false information, causing alarm and instigating violence, for publishing articles critical of the authorities. Two were still in prison at the end of the year. A number of journalists fled the country.

Killings of demonstrators and mass arrests

There were major incidents of apparently unlawful use of lethal force by police against demonstrators. The government said it was investigating but it was unclear whether the alleged perpetrators would be brought to justice.

☞ On 10 March in Teppi town in the southwest, police shot dead up to 200 demonstrators of the Shekicho and Mezenger ethnic groups, who were protesting against administrative boundary changes. Over 300 were detained, including opposition party activists. Ninety were brought to court in August and remanded for trial on charges including murder of four police officers during the demonstration violence.

☞ In March and April, during widespread peaceful demonstrations against regional educational and taxation policies by school and college students in several towns in western Oromia region, police shot dead several demonstrators and wounded and beat others. There were mass arrests of demonstrators, followed by detentions of hundreds of teachers, civil servants and others accused of supporting or instigating the protests. There were reports of torture and ill-treatment of prisoners, who were held incommunicado and accused of links with the OLF. The authorities accused the OLF, which had increased its operations in the region, of organizing the demonstrations. Most detainees were released in mid-2002 but some were still held without charge or trial at the end of the year.

☞ On 24 May in Awassa, capital of Sidama zone in the southern region, regional and federal police shot dead at least 25 people and wounded others at a demonstration which was peaceful until police shot without warning. Two police officers were killed – by other police, according to some sources. Scores of demonstrators and their alleged supporters were detained in the following weeks and many were reportedly tortured. They included a medical doctor, Million Tumato, and Sidama Development Corporation director Mengistu Gonsamo, who were prisoners of conscience. By November, both men had been provisionally released, together with many others, but at least 12 people remained in custody without being charged. The southern region government established an inquiry but the inquiry was not independent and no report had been published by the end of the year.

Detention without charge or trial

There continued to be a pattern of arbitrary and incommunicado detention without charge or trial of people suspected of links with opposition groups such as the OLF and ONLF. Numerous people were detained and tortured in the Somali region for alleged links with the ONLF, particularly after ONLF operations in the region.

☞ Ziad Hussein Abarusky, a railway employee and national football coach, was arrested in June in Dire Dawa and accused with 20 others of involvement with the OLF bombing of the railway offices earlier that month. After reportedly being tortured, he was transferred in September to prison in Addis Ababa and later taken to court. He had not been charged by the end of the year.

☞ Two Sudanese refugee community leaders arrested in December 2001 in Fugnido refugee camp in Gambela region and allegedly tortured for protesting against the ill-treatment of refugees, were released in March without being charged.

☞ In December Abate Angore, Acting General Secretary of the Ethiopian Teachers Association (ETA), was arrested and charged with inciting people against the government in a newspaper article 20 months earlier when he had criticized police violence against student demonstrators. He was released on bail after six days in custody.

Many of the several thousand people detained for political reasons in recent years in the Oromia and Somali regions were reportedly still held, without charge and, in most cases, incommunicado. In some cases, their whereabouts were not known, giving rise to fears that they had "disappeared" or been extrajudicially executed. Regional courts in Oromia reviewed some detention cases and released some detainees, although little information on this process was publicly available. Scores of opposition party supporters detained for apparently political reasons in the southern region during the December 2001 local elections were released without charge in the first few months of 2002.

Political trials

There was continuing concern about the fairness of trials of political prisoners. The government acknowledged some of the problems and said that development of the judiciary and training of judges were a priority.

☞ The trial of some 100 OLF fighters held since 1992 concluded in February; two were sentenced to death and others were imprisoned.

☞ In August Mohamed Ahmed Abdi, chair of the Ogaden Welfare Society, was arrested in Addis Ababa. The government had sought to ban this local non-governmental relief organization and several of its officials had previously been detained. Mohamed Ahmed Abdi, a prisoner of conscience, was taken to Jijiga, tortured, and charged with corruption. In November he escaped from prison and fled the country.

☞ The trial of Professor Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, president of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, and Berhanu Nega, director of the Ethiopian Economic Association, was repeatedly adjourned and had not started by the end of 2002. The two men, who were falsely accused of instigating student demonstrations at Addis Ababa University in April 2001, had been released on bail in June 2001.

☞ In May, the Appeal Court reduced the 15-year prison sentence for armed conspiracy on Taye Wolde-Semayat, President of the ETA, to six years and ordered his release. He had been a prisoner of conscience since 1996 and was convicted after an unfair trial in 1999.

Dergue trials

The long-running trial continued of 46 senior officials of the government of Mengistu Haile-Mariam, overthrown in 1991 and known as the Dergue, who were charged with genocide and crimes against humanity. At the end of 2002, over 1,000 former government and ruling party officials remained in custody, including university president Alemayehu Teferra. They were accused of political killings during the government's "Red Terror" campaign against its opponents in the late 1970s. Between July 2000 and July 2001, 478 had been convicted and 328 acquitted. The Special Prosecutor said all the trials would be completed by 2004.

Torture

Torture of political prisoners, particularly those accused of links with armed opposition groups, continued to be frequently reported. Several women accused of involvement with such groups were reportedly raped. Courts rarely investigated defendants' allegations of torture, but in August a regional court in Awassa ordered police to stop the beating of prisoners held in connection with the May demonstration.

On 27 December hundreds of clergy and men and women members of an Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Lideta, Addis Ababa, were beaten by police when they peacefully demonstrated against the appointment of the new leader of their church. More than 700 of them were reportedly arrested and subjected to torture or ill-treatment for five days in Kolfe police training camp. They were then taken to court and detained for investigation, with bail refused.

Extrajudicial executions

There were continuing reports of killings of civilians by the police and army in circumstances suggesting extrajudicial executions or unlawful killings. Such killings were reported in Addis Ababa and especially in conflict zones in Oromia and the

Somali region. The government said it was investigating police use of excessive force in Teppi and Awassa and made some arrests but no trials had started by the end of the year.

Death penalty

In February, two OLF members were sentenced to death for armed conspiracy and alleged killings in 1992. In April, five Somalis were sentenced to death after being convicted of planting a bomb at the Tigray Hotel in Addis Ababa in 1995, allegedly as members of *Al-Itihad Al-Islamiya*. The appeals of these seven had not been heard by the end of the year.

Although the charges in the Dergue and "Red Terror" trials mostly carried an optional death penalty, those convicted were sentenced to prison terms, except for a few who were given death sentences *in absentia*.

Several death sentences were imposed by criminal courts but no executions were reported.

AI refused visa

In November the government again refused a visa to an AI representative who had been barred from the country since 1995.