

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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The Ethiopian government continues to deny many of its citizens basic human rights. Police and security forces have harassed, illegally detained, tortured, and in some cases, killed members of the political opposition, demonstrators and suspected insurgents. The government has also continued its efforts to muzzle the private press through the use of criminal sanctions and other forms of intimidation.

Ethiopia is affected by chronic food security problems, but the governments attempts to address the issue through a massive resettlement program appear to be courting humanitarian disaster in some areas.

Police Brutality, Torture, and Illegal Detention

Police forces often use excessive force to quell peaceful demonstrations, with demonstrators subject to mass arrest and mistreatment. In January 2004, between 330 and 350 Addis Ababa University students peacefully protesting the arrest of eight other students two days earlier were themselves arrested by Federal Police. While in detention, the students were forced to run and crawl barefoot over sharp gravel for several hours at a time. Police have repeatedly employed similar methods of torture and yet are rarely held accountable for their excesses. Police also responded with force in the early months of 2004 to student demonstrations in secondary schools throughout Oromia. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) reported that dozens of students were detained, some of whom reported being mistreated while in custody. One student was reportedly shot and killed by police during a student demonstration in Tikur Inchini.

In August 2004, several dozen individuals were arrested in and around the town of Agaro in Oromia and imprisoned for allegedly supporting the outlawed Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Some prisoners reported mistreatment while in custody and police reportedly threatened family members wishing to visit detained relatives. As of October 2004, the prisoners remained in detention even though none had been charged with any crime.

In July 2004, the Ethiopian government revoked the license of the venerable Oromo self-help association Mecha Tulema for allegedly carrying out political activities in violation of its charter. The police subsequently arrested four of the organizations leaders on charges of terrorism and providing support to the OLF. The four were released on bail in August but were arbitrarily arrested a week later.

Repression of Opposition Political Parties

Ethiopia will hold national legislative elections in May 2005, and the continuing intolerance of dissent on the part of many officials raises serious concerns as to whether opposition candidates will be able to contest that poll in an environment free of fear. The last national elections in 2000, and local elections held in most of the country in 2001, were marred by serious irregularities including violence directed against opposition supporters and candidates in the most closely contested constituencies. Much of that abuse was orchestrated by provincial officials belonging to parties allied with the ruling coalition. EHRCO observers monitoring local elections held in Somali state in January 2004 reported widespread instances of intimidation, harassment, and arrest of opposition candidates.

Abuses Committed by the Ethiopian Armed Forces

The Ethiopian military has committed human rights abuses against civilians. In Gambella state, armed attacks directed against the Anuak

community claimed up to 424 lives in the last weeks of 2003 and beginning of 2004, with at least some soldiers and policemen participating in the violence. The immediate trigger for the violence was a series of attacks by Anuak insurgents against civilians of other ethnic groups in the area. A government-appointed Commission of Inquiry largely absolved the military of any blame, but serious doubts have been raised about the thoroughness of that commissions work and the credibility of its findings. Many eyewitnesses allege that military involvement in the violence was widespread and apparently well-coordinated, and reports continue to emerge of attacks carried out by the military against Anuak in the countryside. The violence has left some 50,000 people displaced within Gambella state and led several thousand Anuaks to flee to refugee camps near Pochalla, Sudan.

Occasional skirmishes between security forces and armed insurrectionary bands continue in other parts of the country. Security forces frequently arrest civilians, claiming they are members of the OLF in Oromia state or the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and Al-Itihad Al-Islamiya in Somali state. Few of those arrested are brought to trial. Some are released; others are kept in arbitrary detention for prolonged periods, often without a hearing or cause shown, sometimes incommunicado. Frequent reports of extrajudicial executions and torture emerge from Somali region, but access to the region has been restricted by the military to such a degree that these reports are impossible to confirm.

Restrictions on the Press

Ethiopia's last imprisoned journalist, Tewodros Kassa, was freed from prison in September 2004 after serving a two-year sentence for allegedly defaming a dead businessman and inciting political violence. However, many independent journalists, editors, and publishers continue to endure harassment and intimidation, and criminal penalties for a range of speech-related offenses remain on the books.

Serious concerns remain over the government's efforts to introduce a controversial new press law. The government has agreed to reconsider some of the more worrying provisions of the law, such as criminal sanctions for offenses by journalists and the creation of a state-run press council, but it remains to be seen whether any substantive changes will be made. Ethiopia's only independent journalists organization, the Ethiopia Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA), was shut down shortly after publicly opposing the draft law in late 2003, ostensibly for failure to submit required annual audits. The EFJA's leadership was then purged and replaced at a meeting organized by government officials. Many of the EFJA's members continue to contest the legitimacy of the government's actions.

Food Security

Ethiopia has a chronic food insecurity problem, and in recent years failed rains have left millions of people in need of food aid. In an effort to find a long-term solution to these problems, the Ethiopian government has launched a U.S. \$3.2 billion plan aimed at ending the country's dependence on foreign aid over the next several years. A key component of that program is the planned resettlement of 2.2 million people from drought-prone areas to relatively fertile and underpopulated land. However, appalling logistical failures have left many of the 350,000 who have already moved without access to clean water, health care, shelter, education, or even food. Many resettled populations suffer from unacceptably high levels of morbidity, malnutrition, and child mortality. These problems may worsen as the pace of resettlement accelerates in the next 2-3 years. Many settlers have been induced to migrate to the new sites by false promises of schools, clinics, wells, food aid, and new houses.

Judicial Delay

Thirteen years after the overthrow of the former military government (the Derg), several thousand of its former officials remain jailed without trial, charged with genocide, crimes against humanity, and major felonies. Of those who have been tried, many have been acquitted, some after more than a decade of imprisonment. The loss of evidence over the years has resulted in some acquittals, but such losses may also make presenting an effective defense more difficult. Former dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam, on trial in absentia, remains a guest of the Mugabe government in Zimbabwe, with little chance of being held accountable for his abuses so long as he remains there.

Tensions with Eritrea

While the governments of both Ethiopia and Eritrea insist that they are committed to a peaceful resolution of their ongoing border dispute, the situation remains at an impasse. In August 2004, the Boundary Commission charged with demarcating the border reported that it was impossible for it to make any progress under the present circumstances. That commission's 2002 decision was rejected by Ethiopia in 2003 when it became clear that the contested village of Badme, where the war started, would fall on the Eritrean side. Eritrea has refused to negotiate, insisting that Ethiopia is bound by the commission's decision, while Ethiopia refused to consider any solution that requires it to surrender control of Badme. In December 2004, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi softened his previous position by announcing acceptance of the Commission's decision in principle and calling for a dialogue over its implementation.

Human Rights Commissioner and Ombudsman

After years of delay, the Ethiopian government appointed Dr. Kasa Gebre Hiwot and Abay Tekle Beyene to fill the constitutionally-mandated posts of head of the Human Rights Commission and Ombudsman, respectively. Many opposition MPs opposed both appointments, complaining that they were forced through without meaningful debate or consultation. It remains to be seen whether the government will provide these institutions with the capacity to do their work effectively and respect their independence.

Key International Actors

Ethiopia is considered an essential partner of the U.S. in its war on terrorism and Washington has generally been unwilling to apply meaningful pressure on the Ethiopian government over its human rights record. The U.S. suspects Islamic extremist groups are hiding in bordering areas of Somalia, and sometimes inside Ethiopia itself. In 2003, the U.S. military, operating out of its base in Djibouti, trained an Ethiopian army division in counter-terrorism. The United States is also the largest donor of bilateral aid in Ethiopia.

The United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) maintains just under 4,000 troops along the twenty-five kilometer-wide armistice buffer line between the two countries. In September 2004 the Security Council voted to extend UNMEE's mandate through March 2005.

Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people in 90 countries worldwide, spotlighting abuses and bringing perpetrators to justice

