Uproar in Ethiopia over rape, murder of seven-year-old girl

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Ethiopia  
  
The savage rape and murder of a seven-year-old Ethiopian girl have sparked outrage in the country, with many branding her assailant’s punishment as too lenient.  
  
By Wednesday, more than 240,000 people had signed an online petition protesting the 25-year prison sentence meted out to the man convicted of killing Heaven Awot in an attack last year.  
  
Ethiopia’s Minister for Women and Social Affairs, Ergogie Tesfaye, described it as a “horrible and inhumane crime” in a post on her Facebook page, adding that her ministry would follow up on the case with judicial authorities.  
  
Getnet Baye was found guilty of killing Heaven in Bahir Dar, the capital of the northern region of Amhara, but is planning to appeal, Ethiopian media reports said, without specifying the date of the verdict.  
  
The High Court in Bahir Dar “concluded that the child died as a result of the defendant’s violence and strangulation when he raped her because she was too young to withstand the pressure”, the state-run Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation reported.  
  
The Addis Standard said Getnet was the family’s landlord and attacked her in their home.  
  
A Change.org petition, which currently has around 243,000 signatures, urged a review of the sentence to “reflect the gravity of his crimes” and ensure it is the maximum possible penalty under Ethiopian law.  
  
It also called for “robust legal protection” for Heaven’s mother, who it said was being threatened for seeking justice for her daughter.  
  
“Let the punishment meted out serve as a deterrent for such heinous crimes in the future and offer some level of solace to Heaven’s family,” according to the petition, which was started by an Ethiopian feminist organisation.  
  
The Ethiopian Women Lawyers’ Association also criticised the sentence as too light, noting that murder was punishable by a maximum of life imprisonment or even the death penalty.  
  
More than 4,700 cases of gender-based violence were reported to the association last year, it said in its annual report.  
  
“This data reveals the significant challenges women face in securing their safety and rights in Ethiopia,” it said.  
  
But the Amhara Judges Association voiced concerns about the strong reaction to the verdict.  
  
“The legal system should be based on law and order, and the matter is currently under judicial review,” it said, adding that the pressure on the judiciary was “unwarranted”.  
  
“Such actions can affect judicial independence and the supremacy of law,” it said in a statement.  
  
In a report in May, Human Rights Watch said conflict-related sexual violence had reached “alarming levels” in Ethiopia, particularly during the two-year war in Tigray between Ethiopian government forces and their allies and Tigrayan rebel authorities.  
  
It said human rights abuses, including rape and other sexual assaults, were continuing in northern Ethiopia despite the November 2022 peace deal that ended the Tigray conflict.