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country summary

Ethiopia

The Ethiopian government's human rights record remains poor, both within the country and in neighboring Somalia, where since early 2007 thousands of Ethiopian troops have been fighting an insurgency alongside the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia.

Government forces committed serious human rights violations, including rape, torture, and village burnings, during a campaign against Ethiopian rebels in eastern Somali Region (Region 5). Abuses also took place in other parts of the country, notably in Oromia State where local officials carried out mass arrests, extra-judicial killings and economic sanctions.

In March and April 2007 in Mogadishu, Somalia, the Ethiopian military used heavy artillery and rockets indiscriminately, in violation of international humanitarian law, killing hundreds of civilians and displacing up to 400,000 people, as they fought an escalating insurgency.

In Addis Ababa, the government pardoned and released dozens of opposition leaders and journalists detained since the post-election crackdown in 2005. However, the press remains hobbled and local human rights organizations operate with great difficulty.

Abuses in Somali and Oromia States

In June, the Ethiopian military launched a major offensive in Somali region, the eastern third of the country inhabited by ethnic Somalis. The offensive was a response to increasing attacks by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a longstanding armed opposition movement demanding self determination for the region. In April the ONLF attacked an oil exploration site killing nine Chinese oil workers, 50 armed guards, and 28 nearby villagers; the group was also allegedly

responsible for two bombings in May that indiscriminately killed 17 people, mostly civilians, and wounded dozens in Dhagabur and Jigjiga, the state capital.

In the five zones affected by the conflict, the Ethiopian military retaliated by razing entire villages, carrying out public executions, raping and harassing women and girls, arbitrarily arresting, torturing and sometimes killing suspects in military custody; and forcing thousands to flee their homes. They also imposed a commercial blockade on the affected region and confiscated livestock—the main asset in this largely pastoralist region—exacerbating food shortages.

In July, the government expelled the International Committee of the Red Cross and restricted access to the affected region by other international humanitarian agencies. Restrictions on humanitarian agencies were slightly eased in September and October, when the government permitted the UN to conduct an assessment and open regional offices in the affected area.

In Oromia, Ethiopia's most populous state, government authorities have used the fact of a long-standing insurgency by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to imprison, harass, and physically abuse critics, including school children. Victims are informally accused of supporting the OLF, an outlawed rebel group, but supporters of the Oromo National Congress (ONC) and the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM), registered opposition political parties, suffer similar treatment. In early January, more than thirty students were arrested and at least one, a tenth-grader, died as a result of police beatings in Dembi Dollo, western Oromia. Other students were severely injured and hospitalized. Also in January, local police and militia members in Ghimbi shot two high school students dead, one as he and others were walking peacefully along, the other as he covered the body of the first with his own in order to protect him from further harm. In March security officials allegedly executed 19 men and a 14-year-old girl near Mieso in northeastern Oromia. Starting in August, federal and state security forces arrested well over 200 people in western Oromia, including three members of the executive committee of the Nekemte chapter of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council and OFDM members, on suspicion of links to the OLF. Some, including the EHRCO officials, were released under court order after the police failed to provide evidence against them but most were still

detained as of early November. At least 25 were being held in defiance of court orders to release them.

Farmers in Oromia who fail to support the governing political party are denied fertilizer and other agricultural aids over which the government exercises monopoly control.

Abuses Relating to the Conflict in Somalia

Thousands of Ethiopian troops were deployed in Mogadishu and other parts of Somalia in late 2006 as part of the military campaign to oust the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and install the Transitional Federal Government. In March and April 2007, the Ethiopian military indiscriminately bombarded large residential areas of Mogadishu with mortar shells, artillery, and “Katyusha” rockets, killing hundreds of people and causing up to 400,000 people to flee the city. Ethiopian forces made no apparent effort to distinguish between civilian and insurgent targets, and they shelled and occupied several key hospitals located in the frontline areas. (See Somalia chapter)

In collaboration with TFG forces, Ethiopian troops detained and sometimes beat hundreds of men in mass arrests in Mogadishu in June and July. Dozens of suspected ICU supporters who fled Mogadishu in December 2006 were detained by Ethiopian forces in Somalia or by Kenyan officials at the border, and rendered to Ethiopia in January and February, where they were held in incommunicado detention for months of interrogations, by US security agents, among others. At least 40 of the detainees were released in April and May—including more than a dozen women and children under the age of fifteen—but scores of others have disappeared.

Suppression of Free Expression and Attacks on Civil Society

An unknown number of people remain imprisoned without trial after election-related violence following events in June and November 2005, although in July 2007 the government finally released the leadership of the leading opposition party, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and six newspaper publishers.

In proceedings that became popularly known as “the treason trial,” the government had accused the CUD leadership, journalists and others of using unlawful means to change the “constitutional order,” obstruct the exercise of constitutional powers, promote armed rebellion, and impair “the defensive power of the state,” as well as treason and genocide. In April 2007, the treason and genocide charges were dismissed, but some defendants were convicted of the other charges. The court also ordered three newspapers to be closed. Shortly after sentencing, most of the defendants were released and all charges against them were dropped after they submitted letters accepting some responsibility for the 2005 unrest. However, two civil society representatives, Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie, who acted as mediators between the EPRDF and the CUD after the 2005 elections, refused to sign letters of regret and insisted on judicial exoneration. Despite flimsy government evidence against them, they remained incarcerated as of early December 2007, two years after their arrest, because of repeated court recesses.

Following the 2005 elections, the government has sharply reversed a liberalizing trend and subjected independent newspapers and their editors, publishers, and reporters to renewed harassment, intimidation, and criminal charges. Three journalists acquitted during the treason trial fled the country after their release from jail, citing multiple death threats from government security agents. The government and its allies own all electronic media. It blocks access to internet sites critical of its policies. In October, the government began jamming Deutsche Welle and Voice of America Amharic and Oromomifa language broadcasts, the principal source of news for the rural population.

The government has long tried unsuccessfully to outlaw the Ethiopian Teachers Association (ETA), the largest independent membership organization in the country. ETA’s president, released from six years in prison in 2002, was tried in absentia in the treason trial; the chair of ETA’s Addis Ababa branch was acquitted. Four ETA members were arrested in December 26, 2006, severely beaten, and otherwise tortured to coerce confessions that they were members of an armed opposition group, the Ethiopian People’s Patriotic Front. Released in March 2007, they were rearrested in late May and early June.

Lack of Judicial Independence

The judicial system remains unable to assert independence in prominent cases. In the treason trial, for example, the trial judges showed little concern for defendants' procedural and constitutional rights and ignored claims of serious mistreatment by prison authorities. With exceptions, courts generally allow police protracted periods to investigate for evidence that might support the charges brought by prosecutors; in the meantime, defendants remain jailed without an opportunity for release on bail.

In January 2007 a court convicted Mengistu Haile Mariam of genocide in absentia, and sentenced him to life imprisonment. Mengistu, the leader of the former military government, lives in Zimbabwe under the protection of the Zimbabwe government. Several hundred former officials remain jailed awaiting trial, sixteen years after Mengistu's overthrow.

Mistreatment of Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society

The staff of Ethiopia's only nationwide human rights organization, EHRCO, is regularly subjected to government harassment and intimidation. One investigator who fled the country in 2005 was charged in absentia in the treason trial. Three members of the Nekemte executive committee were arrested and imprisoned for fifteen days (see above.)

The Oromo-focused Human Rights League, allowed to register in 2005 after years of litigation, remains inactive. Leaders of the traditional Oromo self-help organization Mecha Tulama, arrested in 2004, were released without trial in early 2007.

Key International Actors

Ethiopia remains deadlocked over a boundary dispute with Eritrea dating from the 1998-2000 war. The war in Somalia is another source of tension between the two countries.

International criticism of the Ethiopian government's human rights performance is muted. The United States and major European donor states view the government as

an important ally in an unstable region. Ethiopia remains the largest beneficiary of US military and development aid in sub-Saharan Africa. The US provided logistical and possibly financial support for Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia in December 2006 and has not pressured Ethiopia to accede to the Eritrea boundary decision.

Ethiopia is also among the top African recipients of European Union aid. After the 2005 election violence, the UK suspended direct budget support to Ethiopia, but has since increased its aid to an annual GBP 130 million in 2007-2008.

China is an increasingly important trading partner. Chinese-Ethiopian trade has increased 17 percent since 2006, to US\$660 million, and Chinese investment has reached \$345 million from just \$10 million four years ago, according to official figures.

In August 2007 the government expelled two thirds of the diplomatic staff of Norway, apparently for criticizing its human rights record and pressing too aggressively for acceptance of the Eritrea boundary commission decision.