

**Ethiopia: Hidden Crackdown in Rural Areas**  
**Independent Inquiry Should Investigate Rural Violence**

Human Rights Watch

(New York, January 13, 2006) - The Ethiopian government is using intimidation, arbitrary detentions and excessive force in rural areas of Ethiopia to suppress post-election protests and all potential dissent, Human Rights Watch said today after a research trip to Addis Ababa and the Oromia and Amhara regions.

"The Ethiopian government is violently suppressing any form of protest and punishing suspected opposition supporters," said Peter Takirambudde, director of Human Rights Watch's Africa Division. "Donor governments should insist on an independent, credible investigation into abuses by federal police and local officials in rural as well as urban areas."

In the wake of the May 15 parliamentary elections, in which opposition parties won an unprecedented number of seats amidst massive controversy over the election results, federal police in the Oromia and Amhara regions have threatened, beaten and detained opposition supporters, students and people with no political affiliation, often in nighttime raids. Alongside local government officials and members of local government-backed militias, the federal police have taken the lead in intimidating and coercing opposition supporters.

In one town in Oromia, a 17-year-old girl was stopped at a police checkpoint, beaten and detained for seven days by federal police for no apparent reason except that she was traveling with students to the funeral of a fellow student killed by police. Also in Oromia, a 38-year-old farm worker and a 40-year-old widow described nighttime raids in which police beat them with rifle butts and batons, resulting in serious injuries.

In Oromia, individuals detained by the federal police are often accused of being supporters of the Oromo Liberation Front, an illegal insurgency group that called for Oromia-wide protests against the government on November 8. Detained individuals were also accused by police of being members of the Oromo National Congress, although it is a registered political party that won seats in the May 15 elections as part of an opposition coalition group.

"The government is deepening its crackdown in Ethiopia's rural areas, far from the eyes and ears of international observers in Addis Ababa,"

Takirambudde said. "People are being terrorized by federal police working hand-in-glove with local officials and militias."

Several recently released detainees from different locations in rural Ethiopia said that police and other officials forced them to sign statements disavowing support to political opposition groups and pledging support to the local ruling party affiliate before being released.

A 37-year-old opposition politician from the Oromo National Congress told Human Rights Watch that federal police in western Oromia beat and arrested him in a nighttime raid on his house in early December.

"They beat every part of my body; the blood was coming out of my mouth," he said. "They beat with guns and sticks and plastic rope."

In the Amhara region, witnesses told Human Rights Watch that kebele (local-level) officials, who are generally members of the Amhara National Democratic Movement—a party affiliated with the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)—played a key role identifying individuals and guiding the federal police to their homes at night, where federal police beat and sometimes arrested them.

"The kebele officials know everyone. They come late, at midnight, knock at the door and take the one they want and beat him," a man from Bahar Dar, Amhara region, told Human Rights Watch.

Individuals in rural Oromia said they have been denied access to fertilizers and seeds by administrative officials who view them as opposition supporters. Farmers who have voiced support for recognized opposition political parties in rural Oromia have reportedly been detained without charge for 30 days or more by kebele "social courts," which are run by government party appointees without legal training.

"Federal police and regional officials responsible for these abuses must be investigated and punished," Takirambudde said. "Prime Minister Meles Zenawi should publicly order all security forces to abide by international standards on the use of force."

Federal police—usually identified by their blue camouflage uniforms—have been responsible for many of the abuses in Addis Ababa and the rural areas since the parliamentary elections in May. According to victims and witnesses in Addis Ababa, Oromia and the Amhara region, federal police beat and shot students and other protestors in those

locations in November. In one case from Bahar Dar, where two students were killed and two were wounded in early November, an eyewitness told Human Rights Watch that the school was surrounded by the police who shot into the compound where the unarmed students were collected.

Federal police also played a key role in the violence in Addis Ababa in early November. Eyewitnesses told Human Rights Watch that the federal police savagely beat unarmed students with batons and shot at their backs as they fled.

Thousands of people were arrested and detained in Addis Ababa and the rural areas following the demonstrations in June and November. Many of the people detained in the wake of the November violence have since been released. Yet more than 3,000 detainees held at the Dedessa military camp since November are apparently being transferred to Ziway prison, 130 kilometers south of Addis Ababa, for further questioning and possible charges.

As many as 2,500 other detainees, including many opposition supporters and some opposition party election observers, are reportedly being held in another detention facility, Bir Shelako, about 385 kilometers northwest of Addis Ababa near Bure town in the Amhara region.

"The Ethiopian government has detained people indefinitely without trial in recent years, so there's a real concern that the authorities will do the same again," Takirambudde said. "Donor governments should call on the Ethiopian government to ensure that all detainees are either promptly charged and given fair trials, or released."

## **Background**

Since the May 15 parliamentary elections in which opposition parties made massive gains in their share of seats, the EPRDF government led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has used repression, intimidation and violence to punish real or perceived opposition supporters and eliminate dissent in both urban centers and rural areas.

In June and again in November, demonstrations by opposition supporters in Addis Ababa were met with lethal force from the government. In June alone, more than 30 people were killed and more than 100 injured in Addis Ababa when security forces fired upon demonstrators, who, in some cases, were throwing stones and blocking roads. On November 1-3, at least 46 protestors and seven policemen died in Addis Ababa. Following each episode of violence, the government arrested thousands of people in Addis Ababa and many

other cities as part of a national crackdown. While most of the June detainees have reportedly been released, thousands of people arrested in November and afterwards remain in detention.

Many supporters of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and other opposition parties were arbitrarily detained without charges, and editors of five newspapers were arrested (and later released on bail), apparently for their coverage of the post-election violence.

On December 21, the government charged 131 persons—including prominent CUD politicians Hailu Shawel, Mesfin Woldemariam and the newly elected CUD mayor of Addis Ababa, Berhanu Nega—with charges including treason, inciting violence and planning to commit genocide. Several civil society activists and 13 journalists were included in the group.

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