

## Protesters killed and 40,000 jailed as Blair's friend quells 'insurrection'

By David Blair in Addis Ababa

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A leader handpicked by Tony Blair to champion Africa has smashed his opponents with the biggest crackdown in the continent's recent history, jailing 40,000 people including boys of 15.

Meles Zenawi, the Ethiopian prime minister and a member of Britain's Commission for Africa, has launched a systematic onslaught against every possible adversary.

The entire leadership of Ethiopia's main opposition party has been locked up. Mr Meles has closed five newspapers and jailed their editors, while police have killed about 80 demonstrators.

Paramilitary units have killed people arbitrarily and thousands have been detained at random.

This operation had thwarted "an insurrection", Mr Meles said.

A crackdown on this scale has not been seen in Africa for 20 years and the repression exceeds anything by President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe for the past decade at least.

Apartheid-era South Africa's onslaught against the black townships in the 1980s provides the only recent comparison. Ethiopia sank into crisis after a general election in May. The opposition said the polls were rigged and called mass protests in the capital, Addis Ababa.

Demonstrators gathered in huge numbers in June and again last month. On both occasions the [security forces opened fire with live rounds](#). A handful of protesters were armed and shot at police. But most were unarmed and western diplomats dismissed Mr Meles's claim that a violent "revolution" was unfolding.

Instead, repression has followed November's demonstrations. Twenty-three leaders of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), including Hailu Shawal, its chairman, will be formally charged with treason today. The CUD holds all 23 of Addis Ababa's parliamentary seats and its most junior figures have not been spared.

Police came for Teshome Legesse, a CUD city councillor, as he was having lunch with his family on Nov 1.

When they beat him with rifle butts, his wife, Etenesh Yimmam, 46, became hysterical. They beat her with sticks, then one of the police shot her twice.

The man who killed Mrs Etenesh received a shouted order from another officer: "Just do it." At that moment, he fired again, apparently aiming at the woman's son, bent over her body. He missed and wounded one of the family's neighbours. Then two officers fired in the air, dispersing the crowd, and the police left in a pick-up, taking the dead woman's husband.

Arrests were taking place across Addis Ababa. The city's jail overflowed and prisoners were held in its compound. As that became crammed, detainees were held in the National Exhibition Centre. Even that overflowed, so government offices were used as temporary prisons.

Detainees were beaten, stripped of their shoes then driven to an old military camp at Dedesa, 250 miles west of Addis Ababa. There they survive in disused barracks on daily rations of four slices of bread.

Western diplomats have reports of executions at Dedesa and of a body being hung on the camp's gates. The best estimate for the total detained is 40,000.

Most were held for a few weeks. But Mr Meles said on Tuesday that 3,000 were still in detention.

Last year Britain gave Ethiopia £44 million of aid, of which £30 million went directly into the government's coffers. This year £50 million has been withheld.

Mesfin Abebe, 15, an orphan who begs on the streets, was arrested, beaten and held at Dedesa for 15 days. "They did



Meles Zenawi:  
Onslaught

not choose who they were arresting," he said. "They just grabbed boys from the street."

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► [9 June 2005: Ethiopian police open fire on crowds](#)

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