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ETHIOPIA

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Despite the government's commitment to democratic reform and the implementation of human rights obligations, the human rights situation in Ethiopia suffered significant setbacks during the course of 1998.

BACKGROUND

The border conflict with Eritrea led to mass deportations of thousands of Ethiopians of Eritrean origin, without regard to due process. Those deemed a "security risk" face deportation to Eritrea. Amnesty International reports that up to 52,000 Ethiopians of Eritrean origin have been deported from Ethiopia since June 1998. Despite discussions between the government and the main armed opposition groups, military operations continued in some areas of the country, creating an atmosphere conducive to human rights violations. Arbitrary arrest and detention without charge, on suspicion of being supporters or sympathizers of various rebel groups, continue as systemic problems. Although the law requires a judge to approve police arrest and search powers, in practice the necessary warrants are rarely sought. Pre-trial detention for periods much longer than allowed under Ethiopian law continues. Ethiopian prisons are overcrowded and conditions are bad: reports continue that prisoners are mistreated and tortured by police, particularly in remote regions of the country where the government continues to battle armed opposition groups. However, visitors are permitted and some international oversight is allowed.

Thousands of Ethiopians of Eritrean origin have been deprived of their nationality, hence of their civic rights, as a result of the border conflict with Eritrea. The Ethiopian government argues that "Eritreans" present in Ethiopia who voted in the 1993 referendum on independence effectively indicated their desire to acquire Eritrean citizenship and thus lost their Ethiopian citizenship.

Despite its stated support for a free press, Ethiopia now has the highest rate of imprisoned journalists of any country in Africa. Nevertheless, a relatively vibrant free print press exists in Addis Ababa, although circulation is very small and few newspapers critical of the government are available outside of the capital. Although the state media have theoretical autonomy from the executive branch, they continue to play the role of official press, and tend not to criticize the government. The private press still has difficulty gaining access to government officials.

Over the past year, the government has continued to take steps that severely limit the exercise of the rights to freedom of assembly and of association, including an ongoing dispute with the Ethiopian Teachers Association that led to closure of the Association's offices and the arrest of members of its executive. As well, a number of non-governmental organizations (including international NGOs and the two major domestic human rights monitoring organizations), experienced significant difficulty in acquiring official registration from the government, as required by law. On the political front there are about 60 registered parties. They complain that their freedom of movement is restricted outside of Addis Ababa. Although the right to freedom of movement and residence within the country seems to be respected, the right to leave the

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