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THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN ETHIOPIA

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As Ethiopia proceeds to consolidate its new federal system and democratic reforms, there is a need for continued efforts to improve human rights and to broaden participation in the democratic process.

BACKGROUND

The Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is a coalition of ethnically based movements which, in 1991, defeated the military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam in a bloody and protracted civil war. The EPRDF won an overwhelming majority of seats in the controversial May 7, 1995 elections for national and regional governments. The elections marked the end of the transitional government which worked to establish a new state structure based on a constitutional electoral democracy, decentralized federalism, a liberalized economy and increased private enterprise.

The new Constitution of Ethiopia includes guarantees of protection for human rights, consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Particularly important in this diverse society are guarantees of religious freedom and respect for all nationalities, areas where the government has shown strong commitment. Provision for the secession of ethnically based regions and state ownership of land are two elements of the Constitution which have proved to be controversial.

Some violent armed opposition to the EPRDF government does exist and confrontations with government forces have been reported in various parts of the country, particularly between the government and the Oromo Liberation Front and groups in the Somali region.

Even though the May 7 elections were peaceful and orderly, political reconciliation and the transition to democracy in Ethiopia is a long term process that cannot yet be taken for granted. Independent political parties were allowed to participate in the elections but did not encounter a completely level playing field. Hence, despite bilateral negotiations initiated by the EPRDF and intensive confidence building efforts by the donor community, the major opposition groupings decided not to participate in the elections, complaining of intimidation by the government and other unfair electoral conditions. Some independent parties and numerous independent candidates did participate.

Intimidation and harassment of political opposition figures continue to be reported. This is primarily related to the abuse of authority by local officials. Victims rarely seek recourse through legal channels because the administration of justice remains very weak, the result of a lack of resources and low public confidence caused by political interference in the judicial system by previous regimes.

Key institutions of civil society - universities, free press, independent trade unions, NGOs - have encountered difficulty in their relations with government. Politically active students at

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