

ETHIOPIA

Issue

Ethiopia continues to consolidate its programme of reforms, focussing mainly on economic and social rights. The government has acknowledged continuing problems in the area of human rights, but considers that time is required to change old attitudes and to strengthen democratic institutions and civil society.

Background

Ethiopia has made major efforts in the last 5 years to liberalize society through more open government, to develop a democratic parliamentary system, and to promote economic development. Important elements of these policies are poverty reduction through food security programs; employment creation through liberalization of the economy, privatization and encouragement of investment; improved nutrition and health interventions; education reforms; and enhanced participation of women in the economy.

Although the Ethiopian Parliament cannot be considered fully representative, due in part to the boycott of the May 1995 elections by the majority of the opposition, a democratic Parliamentary system is emerging. Laws and regulations are being revised to guarantee equal access of women to resources, property, and business activities. The Lower House is working to establish a Human Rights Commission and an Ombudsman's position. The Government has also focussed on civil service reform. In addition, there has been a recent purge of a cabinet minister in a highly visible warning against government corruption.

The Government continues to have problems with regional officials, civil servants, and privileged elements of the population who do not understand and who continue to resist the good governance and democratic reforms that are being put in place. They continue with past practices, in particular the abuse of power (stifling of free speech and individual freedoms, arbitrary detention, etc.), especially at the regional and local levels. Such abuses are at the root of many of the complaints brought to the attention of the international community.

The Government's human rights record has been criticized by Ethiopian parties opposed to the ethnic federalism of the new constitution and by other opposition groups whose commitment to democratic procedures is equivocal. In this context, there have been confrontations, including violent armed opposition to the Government, especially by the Oromo Liberation Front, and groups in the Somali and Afar regions. The response of the federal and regional governments to such confrontations and to external criticism has, on occasion, been a reversion to authoritarian responses which circumvent or undermine the judicial process. Also of concern are reports of extra-judicial killings, reported disappearances of individuals, bombings of civilian populations, and allegations of rape and/or torture at the hands of government military or security forces or opposition groups.

Key institutions of civil society - universities, free press, trade unions, NGOs - continue to encounter difficulty in their relations with government, especially at the regional and local