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Centre for Human Rights  
Faculty of Law

## PRESS STATEMENT

# CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNED ABOUT THE ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND UNLAWFUL DETENTIONS IN ETHIOPIA

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The Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria (Centre) is concerned about the arbitrary arrests and unlawful detentions of people in Ethiopia, including academics and humanitarian workers. Authorities in Ethiopia are targeting people based on ethnic origin and political persuasion after the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) threatened to invade Addis Ababa.

Academics and humanitarian workers perceived to be supporting the cause of Tigrayan's have also been targeted by the Ethiopian government. According to the United Nations (UN) Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, over 1000 people have been detained as Ethiopia carried out mass arrests after the declaration of a state of emergency on 2 November 2021. The UN Secretary General, Mr. Antonio Guterres, called for the immediate release of 16 UN staff who were being held in detention centres without charge. Subsequently, 6 UN staff members have been released.

The arbitrary and unlawful killings, arrests and detentions of civilians by the authorities in Ethiopia are a violation of international human rights law. According to information gathered by the Centre from some of the targeted victims (who requested anonymity), there is inadequate investigation and interrogation prior to arrest and suspects are not informed of the charges they are facing.

Thousands of people have been killed since fighting erupted in northern Ethiopia in November 2020, triggering a humanitarian crisis that the UN says has brought hundreds of thousands of people to the brink of famine, and displaced more than two million.

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While a range of atrocities as a result of the actions of both the government and the TPLF has been unacceptable throughout the period, recent developments in the conflict have heightened the concerns for the protection of human rights in the country. The TPLF said last week that it had taken a town just 220 km from the capital, Addis Ababa. The government has however disputed this assertion.

The Minister of Justice, Gedion Timothewos, further stated that the state would dispense with the usual law enforcement systems and procedures. This move was taken after the TPLF announced that they had captured 2 strategic towns in the Amhara region and considered marching to Addis Ababa. The TPLF has since been designated a terrorist organisation.

The Centre urges the Ethiopian authorities to respect human rights and the rule of law during the 6 months state of emergency. It is true that international law permits restrictions to human rights during public emergencies where necessary to preserve state security and public order. Such restrictions to human rights must serve a pressing public need, have a legitimate aim and meet the requirements of proportionality. Human rights norms such as the rights to freedom of movement, assembly, association and expression are subject to state derogations, but only to the extent strictly required by the exigency of the situation and restrictions must not be overbroad.

The Centre calls on authorities in Ethiopia to stop the arbitrary arrests and detention of civilians. All civilians are entitled to be presumed innocent until found guilty by the courts. Suspects who are still being held in detention centres must either be released immediately or be taken before courts of law without further delay and, if prima facie cases are established, be tried before the courts observing fair trial rights. The detainees must further be allowed access to lawyers and members of their families. Upon arrests on reasonable suspicion of having committed crimes, all suspects must be informed of the criminal charges they are facing and must be taken before a judicial officer within 2 days after their arrest.

The Centre considers the state of emergency a result of the political instability caused by military attempts to unseat a constitutionally elected government of Ethiopia. However, even if the state of emergency can be justified, the state should not suspend respect for certain non-derogative rights such as liberty, life and freedom from torture.

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