

Ethiopia: Students killed in brutal police attack

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Ethiopian Special Forces police opened fire on a peaceful protest organised by students at Addis Ababa University (AAU) on April 18, killing at least 41 people and wounding 250.

Reports state that most of those who died were students and unemployed youth who had joined the demonstration in support of the university students' demands.

Amnesty International issued a statement condemning the police for using "excessive force against students and demonstrators," and said that hospitals in the city were finding it difficult to cope with the number of injured.

Tensions have been high since the University Administration disbanded the Student Council last December and banned the student newspaper.

On April 10, around 4,000 students began boycotting classes and demanded their right to freedom of association. They called for the removal of armed police stationed on the campus, for the reinstatement of the Student Council and the resumption of publication of their newspaper. The students told reporters that they felt intimidated by the police presence on campus, and that the police would order them to disperse if they attempted to gather in groups to discuss issues.

The students' boycott on April 10 was followed by days of police violence directed against peaceful demonstrations that began to spread across the city to other universities and schools in support of the AAU students.

One report by the *Reuters* news agency described how some student dormitories "were spattered with blood after the clashes, with gunshot holes in the walls".

Another eyewitness report said that the police action at the Menelik Secondary School was "brutal" and

stated that the police "engulfed the school, beat students and fired shots".

Clashes between police and demonstrators continued over a number of days outside AAU, with demonstrators directing their anger at government buildings, smashing windows and setting fire to cars with government number plates.

A meeting took place on April 16 between student leaders and the Minister of Education, Genet Zewdie. At this meeting, Zewdie, who is also the President of the University Senate, issued an ultimatum ordering students to resume classes by 12 noon on Wednesday April 18. If any student refused to comply with this order, she stated, it would be seen as an act of "voluntary withdrawal" from the university and such students would not be allowed readmission.

It was agreed by the Education Minister that police would be withdrawn from campus and be replaced by security guards, but students were angry that Zewdie would give no specific date when this would take place.

Before the noon deadline had expired on April 18, Special Forces police stormed the AAU campus, beating and firing at students. Police also raided surrounding churches and mosques, dragging students out who had sought refuge there and loading them onto military wagons. Press reports also state that the police stormed the homes of workers living in the Arat Kilo area that is situated near the university, and beat women and children.

Thousands of students were arrested and are being held in a police training centre in the village of Sendafa, 38 kilometres (25 miles) northeast of the capital Addis Ababa. Hundreds of parents have travelled to the village from all over Ethiopia in a desperate attempt to find out if their children are alive or dead.

Student protests in Addis Ababa are one expression of deep and widespread discontent felt by the Ethiopian population towards the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and its dominant party the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF).

A two-year war with neighbouring Eritrea, involving hundreds of thousands of soldiers, ended with a UN-brokered peace deal in June 2000, although wrangling over the details of the settlement continues. The war between the two nationalist regimes that were previously allies, ostensibly over disputed border territory, left over 100,000 dead. The cost of the war has left Ethiopia, already a poor country, in a state of virtual economic collapse.

The United Nations recently issued a report ranking Ethiopia 171 out of 174 countries in its Human Development Index. Annual average income in Ethiopia is about \$100 per head and one in ten of the population need food aid to survive. It is estimated that 6.2 million Ethiopians are chronically short of food.

Brutal suppression of the student protests by the police is part of a wider political clampdown ordered by the TPLF against any individual or party criticising its actions.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) recently criticised the government for human rights violations, the rounding-up of homeless people from the streets of Addis Ababa and its detention of political opponents. There are up to 15,000 political prisoners in Ethiopia. The EHRCO is one of a number of organisations that the government recently accused of "promoting anarchy" in Ethiopia.

The clampdown is accompanied by growing divisions within the country's ruling clique. In March, internal divisions within the TPLF led to 12 of the 30 member central committee breaking with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. The breakaway group accused the prime minister of being "too soft" in his stance towards Eritrea, and criticised the peace agreement between the two countries. They called for the continuation of the war, attacking Zenawi for his cooperation with the IMF and World Bank, and of abandoning the fight for the creation of a "Greater Tigray".

The Ethiopian government has now reopened the UAA, giving students just two days to reregister for their courses. Most are refusing to return until

thousands of imprisoned fellow students are released from police stations and detention camps.



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