

Ethiopia: West plays down murder of demonstrators

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Security forces fired indiscriminately at crowds of unarmed protesters in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, killing 36 and wounding more than 100 people on June 8. Protests had erupted in Addis Ababa and several other towns and cities over the previous week in response to alleged fraud in the disputed elections of May 15.

Final election results have not been announced, with both the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and the government alliance claiming provisional victory. The CUD made large gains in the capital and other urban areas where there is widespread opposition to the government.

Taxi drivers and shopkeepers went on strike across the capital following the security forces' shooting of protesters. As the unrest intensified, the government followed up with a mass sweep of arrests. Anyone suspected of sympathy with the opposition was a target, and thousands were detained. Hundreds have since been released, but many remain in detention camps north and south of Addis Ababa.

Exact numbers are unclear, but human rights organisations believe that more than 3,000 people have been arrested. Given the government's record of prisoner abuse, they are very worried about the conditions in which those detained are being held.

Despite the release of many from the original sweep, more targeted arrests, of CUD and student activists, continue unabated. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports hundreds of arrests occurring in Gondar, Bure, Bahir Dar, Debre Markos, Dessie, Wondo Genet, Kombolcha, Jinka and Awassa over the last week or so. Many students and CUD officials remain in custody without charges.

The authorities have also cracked down on the foreign and domestic media and on human rights

organisations, with journalists critical of the government being harassed and their equipment confiscated. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council reports that five of its members have been arrested in an attempt to paralyse its work. Their whereabouts are unknown.

The response of Western governments to the killings and arbitrary arrests has been very low key. Ethiopia is a client state of Washington, and its government has fully collaborated with the "war on terror." Prime Minister Meles Zenawi sat on the Commission for Africa, the British-led body that set out the aid proposals and strategy for Africa that Prime Minister Tony Blair is touting at the forthcoming G8 summit.

Both the United States and the European Union have issued mild statements condemning the violence, but blaming "both sides" and urging restraint.

The EU's head of foreign policy, Javier Solana, and development minister, Louis Michel, appealed "to all parties to avoid incendiary language or action that could lead to further violence."

The US State Department director for East Africa, Jane Gaffney, "condemned the excessive use of force," but described the elections as "very impressive." She added that they should be viewed "within the context of democratisation around the world and particularly in Africa where we see a really close relationship between development/prosperity and democracy. You really can't have one without the other."

Blair has made no official comment on the situation. The pro-Labour government *Guardian* newspaper in a June 13 editorial gives an apology for British sympathies for the Zenawi government. "The problem," the *Guardian* states, "is to establish the difference between a protest against a government's failure to deliver what is in its capacity to deliver and a

protest against the failure to deliver what would be beyond the capacity of any government in present circumstances.”

The editorial adds that “to maintain democratic politics in a country as poor as Ethiopia is a hugely difficult task.”

Presumably, the protesters who were killed made the mistake of demanding the impossible—fair elections.

Following some exposure in the British media on the situation in Ethiopia, the Blair government felt obliged to appear to do something and so put on hold £20 million worth of direct budget aid to the poverty-stricken country. Development Minister Hilary Benn announced the freeze, saying, “It is sensible to hold on to that to see how the situation develops.” He also made clear that the £60 million that Britain has already given this year will not be affected, “because it is in the interest of the Ethiopian people.” He added, “I do not want the poor to suffer as a result of what has happened here in the last few weeks.”

Despite international observers, most notably ex-US President Jimmy Carter, declaring satisfaction with the election, complaints of election irregularities have been filed in around 300 of the country’s 547 constituencies. These include voter intimidation, ballot box stuffing, the disappearance of ballot boxes, and ballots exceeding official voter numbers.

The ruling coalition enjoys vast powers of patronage throughout the country where some 85 percent of a 71-million population are poor peasants. The state owns all the land in Ethiopia, and peasants are fearful of being evicted by the government, so even without rigging it is likely to have won support in the rural areas.

Following negotiations headed by the European Union’s representative, the government has now agreed to investigate the election irregularities and has postponed announcing the official results until July 8. The ban on demonstrations has been extended until then.

Under Western pressure, it seems likely that the opposition could be brought into coalition with Zenawi’s Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The State Department’s Gaffney stated that “the ruling party and the opposition parties are going to be partners in whatever government finally emerges.”

The elections showed that dissatisfaction with the government was very high throughout the country. This has a number of causes, including the poverty suffered by the vast majority of the population; high unemployment; years of war with neighbouring Eritrea; and ongoing drought with attendant food shortages. Although the opposition CUD was able to utilise this dissatisfaction, its privatisation policies are even more supportive of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank’s free market agenda than those of the EPRDF and would prove just as disastrous.



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