

Death penalty for blogger, prison for journalists

NEW YORK: A US-based journalist convicted on politicized terrorism charges in Ethiopia was sentenced to death in absentia yesterday, 26 January 2012, while two other Ethiopian journalists received heavy prison sentences in connection with their coverage of banned opposition groups, according to news reports.

Elias Kifle, exiled Ethiopian editor of the Washington-based opposition website *Ethiopian Review*, was handed a death sentence in absentia on Thursday, which followed a 2007 life sentence given to him also in absentia on charges of treason for his coverage of the government's brutal repression of 2005 post-election protests, CPJ research shows.

A court in the capital, Addis Ababa, sentenced Reeyot Alemu, a columnist with the independent weekly *Feteh*, and *Woubshet Taye*, deputy editor of the now-defunct weekly *Awramba Times*, to 14 years in prison and 33 000 birrs (US\$1 500), news reports said.

"The death penalty for Elias Kifle and the prison sentences for Reeyot Alemu and Woubshet Taye are based on their writings about political dissent. This verdict has little to do with justice," said CPJ Africa advocacy coordinator Mohamed Keita. "We condemn this politicized prosecution designed to cow critical voices into silence and call on the supreme court to reverse all the convictions."

The three journalists were charged in September with lending support to an underground network of banned opposition groups, which has been criminalized under the country's 2009 anti-terrorism law. Alemu and Taye were arrested in June and held for weeks on government accusations of plotting to sabotage telephone and electricity lines before they were charged. In the trial, government prosecutors presented as evidence intercepted emails and phone calls between the journalists, as well as more than 25 *Ethiopian Review* articles on the activities of opposition groups, CPJ research shows.

Eskinder Nega, another Ethiopian blogger, has been imprisoned since September and could be sentenced to death if convicted of similar politicized terrorism charges in connection with his coverage of banned opposition groups.

Kifle is the first journalist to be handed a death sentence in Ethiopia, according to CPJ research. Since 1992, only two people have been executed after being given the death penalty, while other death sentences have been commuted to life in prison, according to an Ethiopian legal expert.

Source: allAfrica.com

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