# **Ethiopia Detains Two Prominent Opposition Politicians**

Written by

Wednesday, 31 August 2011 14:39 - Last Updated Wednesday, 31 August 2011 14:57

(VOA News) - Two prominent Ethiopian opposition politicians have been detained, at least one of them on terrorism-related charges. But opposition leaders are questioning the charges, saying the detentions appear politically motivated.

#### **Bekele Gerba**

Government spokesman Shimeles Kemal says senior opposition figure Bekele Gerba was detained Saturday, charged with having ties to the newly-outlawed Oromo Liberation Front, or OLF, which is fighting for independence for Oromos, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group.

"Bekele Gerba was arrested, detained by the Federal Anti-Terrorist Task Force in his alleged connection with his involvement with the recently proscribed terrorist organization OLF," said Shimeless.

Bekele, an English teacher at Addis Ababa University, is a member of the executive committee of Ethiopia's main opposition coalition, Medrek, and deputy chairman of the Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (OFDM).

## Olbana Lelisa

Medrek leaders say another prominent Oromo opposition politician, Olbana Lelisa of the Oromo People's Congress, was also detained. It was not immediately clear whether Olbana was also charged with terrorism.

Mogga Frissa, who currently serves as chairman of both Medrek and OFDM, says both men were involved in external communications for their parties. In that capacity, they had been disseminating data about drought and malnutrition in remote regions of southern Ethiopia, data that sometimes contradicts government information.

Mogga said Bekele in particular had told of the arrests of people who had supplied information for a recent BBC news report. That report alleged Ethiopia has used billions of dollars in development aid as a tool for political repression.

"Bekele was talking about the famine in Ethiopia, and people were giving information to these people," said Mogga. "He heard some people who gave information to the BBC have been imprisoned in [the] south. So we suspect this is the cause."

Ethiopia's government strongly denied the BBC report, calling it irresponsible. A statement posted on the foreign ministry website noted that opposition parties and the group Human Rights Watch had made the allegations previously, and they had been found to be groundless.

# **Ethiopia Detains Two Prominent Opposition Politicians**

Written by

Wednesday, 31 August 2011 14:39 - Last Updated Wednesday, 31 August 2011 14:57

The statement argues that allegations of aid misuse are aimed at persuading donors to cut off assistance, at a time when millions of people are suffering from one of the worst droughts in decades.

# Opposition: Detentions a "witch hunt"

Veteran opposition leader Beyene Petros was among those quoted in the BBC report. In a telephone interview Tuesday, he said he stands by allegations of aid abuse. Beyene called the arrests of Bekele and Olbana part of a "witch hunt" that will have a chilling effect on anyone who might provide embarrassing information to the press.

"They are harassing our supporters and people down in the south, especially one individual whom they alleged has been guiding them to some locations where the BBC reporters obtained information," said Beyene. "The government has dispatched security operatives to the area trying to dig up charges against individuals providing information, which the government finds sensitive and wants to hide."

The latest arrests come at a time when two Ethiopian journalists who were critical of the government are facing charges of involvement in terrorist activities. Those arrests have raised concerns from international human rights and press freedom groups, who say the pretext of terrorism is being used to silence dissent.

Prosecutors, however, allege the journalists were involved in plot to sabotage electricity and telephone lines, and say the charges have nothing to do with their professional activities.