

Treason charges filed in Ethiopia

Prosecutors in Ethiopia have charged 131 jailed opposition leaders, reporters and aid workers with crimes ranging from treason to "genocide".

The charges relate to last month's protests over disputed May elections that saw at least 46 people killed.

Under Ethiopian law, some of the crimes carry the death penalty.

The move comes as a UK minister visits Ethiopia, where he is expected to press for dialogue between the government and opposition parties.

The Minister for Africa, Lord Triesman, is due to hold talks with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi as well as opposition figures and non-government organisations.

There have been repeated calls from the diplomatic community for political prisoners to be freed, the BBC's East Africa correspondent Karen Allen says.

So far the government in Addis Ababa has maintained these are serious crimes and those charged must be tried.

Case adjourned

Ethiopia's Judge Adil Ahmed told a court in the capital on Friday that charges against the 131 suspects included treason, genocide, conspiracy and causing an armed uprising.

About 55 defendants were present in the packed courtroom, including Berhanu Nega, a top leader of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), and human rights activist Mesfin Woldermairam.

Several of them have been on hunger strike for nearly three weeks to protest against their incarceration.

Prosecutors said all the defendants would face the same charges, and the case was adjourned until 21 December.

Some 8,000 people have been freed since the protests organised by the opposition, claiming that the 15 May elections were rigged.

There are no official figures for the number who remain in custody but diplomats say it is at least 3,000.

Mr Meles' Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front won a majority in polls but the opposition gained many seats.

The opposition is made up of the two broad groupings - the CUD and the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces, which unlike the CUD, has taken up its parliamentary seats.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/4537340.stm>

Published: 2005/12/17 11:48:31 GMT

© BBC MMV