

**MEDIA ADVISORY**

**Ethiopian anti-poverty campaigners vindicated by court**

26 December 2007 – Ethiopian activists Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie may face brief additional time behind bars, as the court today sentenced them to two years and six months in prison on charges of incitement, despite demands by the prosecution that they receive the maximum sentence of 10 years.

*"While we welcome the fact that Daniel and Netsanet may soon be reunited with their friends, families and colleagues in civil society, we are perplexed and dismayed by the additional sentence. Everyday they have spent and possibly will spend in prison is a deep injustice. They are true heroes of Ethiopia, true heroes of Africa and for everyone around the world who supports democracy, justice and the fight against poverty ,"* said **Kumi Naidoo, Secretary General of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation and Co-Chair of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP)** who was present at the sentencing this morning.

Daniel and Netsanet, coordinators of GCAP in Ethiopia, were today sentenced to two years and six months in prison by the Federal High Court in Addis Ababa for provocation and preparing incitement in the aftermath of the May 2005 elections. On Monday, they were acquitted of conspiracy to overthrow the constitutional order, but were found guilty on the lesser charge. CIVICUS and GCAP anticipate that they will soon be released, given the two years and two months they have already spent behind bars, as well as their good behaviour and their willingness to cooperate with the court.

Before sentencing them this morning, the judges read a statement recognising their contributions to peace, democracy and the rule of law in Ethiopia. The presiding judge dissented from the verdict and has consistently maintained they are innocent of the charges, finding their actions to be fully within the constitution.

*"The judges' statement today read more like a citation for the Nobel Peace Prize than justification for even a single day they have spent in prison ,"* said Kumi Naidoo.

Since Daniel and Netsanet's arrest in November 2005, civil society organisations in Ethiopia have come under increasing scrutiny, and many have been forced into silence on controversial issues for fear of meeting the same fate as Daniel and Netsanet.

Speaking from Ethiopian Federal court, Kumi Naidoo said, " *This case has significance beyond the travesty of justice against Daniel and Netsanet. Their continued detention has had a chilling effect on civil society in Ethiopia. It is extremely important that the judges stated none of their actions were against the constitution and*

*were in fact legitimate civil society activities. We hope that this vindication will enable civil society to fully exercise its role, including advocacy for human rights, democracy, peace and the eradication of poverty ."*

Aside from their work with GCAP, Daniel is also head of the policy department at ActionAid International Ethiopia. Netsanet is also the founder of local human rights group Organisation for Social Justice in Ethiopia.

At the start of the trial in May 2006, 131 opposition politicians, journalists, civil society leaders and organisations stood accused of a range of charges from genocide to treason. They were among thousands who were detained following protests accusing the government of rigging the 15 May 2005 parliamentary elections. Many of the accused were acquitted during the course of the trial. Others were convicted but pardoned in July and August 2007 – all of whom signed a confession, admitting use of "unconstitutional means to change the constitutionally established government functions" following the 2005 elections.

Although they were asked to sign a similar statement, Daniel and Netsanet declined. They argued that their activities in 2005 were entirely legal and did not serve to undermine, but rather to protect and promote Ethiopia's constitutional order.

Recognised as Amnesty International prisoners of conscience, Daniel and Netsanet were consistently denied bail, even after seven attempts, including an appeal to the Supreme Court.

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