

19 October 2006

Ethiopian protesters 'massacred'

Ethiopian police massacred 193 protesters in violence following last year's disputed elections, an independent report says.

It said the government used "excessive force" to crack down on protesters who claimed the elections had been rigged.

Ethiopian security forces said 58 people, including seven police, had died during an attempted revolution.

Ethiopian judge Wolde-Michael Meshesha, who carried out the investigation, has since fled the country.

Cover-up

People took to the streets of the capital, Addis Ababa, and other cities in June and November last year to protest the outcome of a general election in May.

The report said that the government had concealed the true extent of deaths at the hands of the police.

It said that 193 people had been killed, including 40 teenagers. Six policemen were also killed and some 763 people injured.

They had been shot, beaten and strangled.

The judge described the deaths as a massacre and said the toll could well have been higher.

"The police fired, definitely, as a kind of massacre of the demonstrators - especially in Addis, where more than 160 civilians were dead," by shooting, he told the BBC.

He said there was no doubt that excessive force had been used.

He claimed he had been put under pressure to alter his findings and fled into hiding in Europe when he received anonymous death threats.

Democracy

More than 100 opposition leaders, journalists and aid workers were rounded up during the protests and are currently on trial, accused of treason and attempted genocide.

Police records showed 20,000 people were arrested during the anti-government protests, the judge said. The European Union's chief observer during the May 2005 elections, Ana Gomes, told AP news agency the report exposed real doubts about the Ethiopian government's commitment to democracy.

"It is time the EU and US realize that the current regime in Ethiopia is repressing the people because it lacks democratic legitimacy and is actually weak," she said.

"It is driving Ethiopia to more poverty, conflict and war."

In January, Britain withheld \$87m in aid because of concerns over the unrest.