

Lantos Welcomes News of the Release of 38 Political Prisoners in Ethiopia

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Committee on Foreign Affairs

Press Release

Washington, DC (July 20, 2007) – U.S. Congressman Tom Lantos, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, today welcomed the release by the Ethiopian government of 38 of the country's parliamentarians and leaders of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), journalists and civil society activists. The group was arrested in connection with demonstrations protesting the conduct and outcomes of the Ethiopian national elections of November 2005.

"While Ethiopia made enormous strides in laying the groundwork for the 2005 elections, many of these gains were wiped out by the subsequent police attacks on civilians and arrest of opposition leaders," Lantos said. "The international community celebrates their rightful release. But let us remember that the crackdown, convictions and sentencing never should have taken place, and that the nearly 200 people who lost their lives in the protests will never be forgotten."

In announcing the pardons, Prime-Minister Meles Zenawi assured the restoration of the detainees' rights to vote and to participate fully in the political sphere in Ethiopia. At least 36 more activists remain in detention because they either refused to sign a required letter of remorse or because they signed the letter but their cases remain undecided. Another five have been sentenced, in absentia, to life in prison.

"I call on Prime Minister Zenawi to authorize the unconditional release of the remaining prisoners," said Lantos, who is the founding co-chairman of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. "And to raise the world's estimation of Ethiopia as a nation that values justice, the government must take concrete steps towards establishing and respecting the freedom of press, assembly and rule of law."