

CIVICUS & GCAP Press Release

Freedom for Ethiopian anti-poverty campaigners

28 March 2008 – After a long two years and five months in prison, the two Ethiopian anti-poverty campaigners Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie were released from prison this afternoon.

“We are thrilled that Daniel and Netsanet have finally been released from prison. It has been a long wait for them and their families, but finally freedom and justice is theirs. The release is a testament to Daniel and Netsanet’s contributions to human rights and poverty eradication in Ethiopia, Africa and around the world, and is a vindication of civil society efforts to confront injustice.” said Kumi Naidoo, Secretary General of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation and Co-Chair of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), speaking from outside Kaliti Prison in Addis Ababa upon their release.

Daniel and Netsanet, both coordinators of GCAP in Ethiopia, were today released following recent negotiations. While they were acquitted on treason related charges in December 2007, they were found guilty on the lesser charge of “provocation and preparing incitement” and sentenced to two and a half years in prison. If they had served the full sentence, they would have been released in early May 2008.

“It is indeed a wonderful moment for civil society in Ethiopia. Two of the country’s most courageous defenders of human rights and social justice are once again free. Today, their release is being celebrated in the over 100 country coalitions of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty and CIVICUS members in more than 120 countries,” said Irfan Mufti, Campaign Manager of GCAP.

Daniel and Netsanet were the last two remaining detained in the high profile treason trial that originally charged 131 journalists, politicians and civil society leaders on 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.

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. Daniel and Netsanet were instrumental in coordinating legitimate election monitoring activities by local civil society organisations during the May 2005 election.

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