

Ethiopia to hold late leader's funeral on 2 September

Friday 24 August 2012

August 23, 2012 (ADDIS ABABA) - The funeral of the late Ethiopian leader, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, will be held on 2 September, a national committee set up to organise the funeral proceedings said on Thursday.

57-year-old Zenawi died on late Monday evening following an unspecified illness that had kept him out of the public eye for over two months.

His body arrived in Addis Ababa from Brussels, where he had been receiving treatment, on Wednesday night. Thousands of mourners gathered outside the International Bole Airport to pay their respects.

The National Committee said that "the way the people welcomed the body of the late Prime Minister back to Addis Ababa demonstrated just how close he had been to the hearts of the people.

Communication minister, Bereket Simon, has said that his successor, foreign minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, would remain in the post of prime minister until the next elections in 2015 and will soon be sworn in during the coming parliamentary session.

However, some political analysts say Ethiopia's ruling party is not ready to follow the intellect of Zenawi and there might be a power vacuum in the horn of Africa's largest country.

Meles has been considered by supporters as an economic transformer of his country and a key peace making factor in the East African region despite a 2 year border war with Eritrea in the late 1990's and more recent military interventions in neighbouring Somalia.

Under Meles Ethiopia has played a pivotal role in the signing and implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement between Sudan and South Sudan, even sending peacekeepers to the contested Abyei region last year to diffuse a potentially explosive situation around the time of South Sudan's secession.

Since overthrowing the former Dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam's Communist military junta over two decades ago Zenawi has made great strides in improving Ethiopia's economic out put and been widely accepted by western powers. He has been a central figure in the working of the African Union, which is based in the Ethiopian capital and has been an articulate exponent of pan-Africanism and calls to address climate change.

However, his leadership also has been criticised by international human right groups, with Ethiopia overtaking Eritrea as the the African country detaining the most journalists. In his 21 years in power Zenawi did little to bring about fundamental changes in human rights.

Following Zenawi's death, in a statement Human Rights Watch said that, Ethiopia has seen a sharp deterioration in civil and political rights, with mounting restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

The group called on the new Ethiopian leadership to commit to fundamental human rights reforms in the wake of the death of the late leader urging Ethiopia's international partners to call on interim government to back fundamental rights and freedoms in the country and a prompt rollback of repressive laws.

"Ethiopia's government should commit to respect for human rights and core rights reforms in the coming days and weeks," said Leslie Lefkow, deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch.

"The country's new leadership should reassure Ethiopians by building on Meles's positive legacy while reversing his government's most pernicious policies."

"Ethiopia's leadership should demonstrate its commitment to human rights reform by taking urgent steps to amend or repeal some of the most damaging legislation, including its anti-terrorism laws and restrictions on civil society," Lefkow said.

HRW urged the immediate release of political prisoners who the group said were unlawfully detained, further urging for a reform on legislation and repeal restrictive laws.

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