

**THE STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN ETHIOPIA AND THE ROLE OF THE
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

**Presented at
The Symposium on Human Rights in the Horn of Africa
Horn of Africa Social Justice Forum
York University, Toronto, Canada
June 9, 2007**

Presented by
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On behalf of the Solidarity Committee for Ethiopian Political Prisoners - Canada (SOCEPP-Canada), I would like to thank the Ogaden Human Rights Group and Students of York University for holding this important event on Human Rights in the Horn of Africa. We are honoured and privileged to be invited to this important meeting on such an issue that is timely and very dear to SOCEPP-Canada and the cause it stands for.

SOCEPP- Canada is a community based, non-profit organization registered in Canada to advocate for the respect and protection of human rights in Ethiopia and elsewhere. Since our formation in 1998, we have brought to the attention of Canadians, including governments and opposition parties, NGO's etc., facts relating to human rights abuses in Ethiopia. Over the years, we have compiled records of numerous violations with extensive evidence and duly exposed such violations to policymakers in Canada and elsewhere. We have also participated in Human Rights Consultations sponsored by Department of Foreign Affairs over the years and worked very closely with Canadian parliamentarians and campaigned for the protection of Human and Democratic Rights in Ethiopia. We have organized a number of discussion forums on HR issues including taking an active role in the recent round table on human and political rights in Ethiopia held on May 04, 2007 and a public meeting the day after in Ottawa. The round table was organized in partnership with AI Canada, Canadian Peace Coordinating Committee (CPCC), Sub-Sahara Group and Partnership Africa Canada.

Over the last three decades, the issue of human rights has garnered a special place among citizens of Ethiopia and their human rights advocates. During the era of the military regime (the Dergue) led by Col Mengistu H/M, massive violations of citizens' civic, democratic and human rights took place with impunity. The 'Red Terror' (coined in Amharic as: '*netisa ermja*'), gave the military, the police, and the armed civilians/"revolutionary" guards the *carte-blanche* power to kill anyone, at any time, without fear of the law, and under full government protection and immunity, in the final analysis, decimated a whole generation of fighters for justice.

With Mengistu gone and the new regime (EPRDF) coming to power, it was initially hoped by many Ethiopians and the international community that this was to mark an end to all forms of injustice and the beginning of something new where millions no longer starve, fear persecution, torture and disappearances as in the past. Sadly, the last sixteen years have proven to be nothing less than disappointing to Ethiopians and members of the international community. Thanks largely to the continued repression of dissent by Mr. Meles Zenawi's ethno-dictatorial regime, the international community's

own strong interest in fostering democracy, good governance, peace, and prosperity in Ethiopia, under this regime, has also been shattered.

If one theme is to be picked as a marker for EPRDF rule in the past 16 years, it is probably the fact that promises made and subsequent actions taken by the regime never intersect. Beautiful sounding rules and regulations in the books, but same, old and abusive practices fill the pages of its rule.

As one scholar put it 'looking at the constitution of the "Republic of Ethiopia" one will no doubt be overawed by the panoply of political rights and due process guarantees in it. Indeed, the reader may be left with the distinct impression that this constitution describes not Ethiopia, but Utopia-- that imaginary island with a perfect social, legal, and political system described by Sir Thomas Moore. And looking through the prism of this constitution, Ethiopia would appear to be a land where its citizens live in perfect freedom and harmony with ironclad protections for their individual rights, unencumbered by fear of government abuse, political persecution and harassment, or extrajudicial killings of perceived political opponents"

On closer examination, one quickly discovers that the EPRDF constitution is merely a hollow collection of borrowed legal platitudes, clichés, buzzwords and slogans. To paraphrase Shakespeare, "it is a constitution full of lofty sounding legal words and phrases signifying nothing, at least in terms of the current day-to-day protection of the rights of ordinary Ethiopian citizens"

This is the kind of the government's modus operandi that has led many to attribute it to the semblances of democratic experiments when it in fact is nothing more than an appeasement and showcasing for the donor community. To day there is more or less a consensus that the EPRDF regime is not democratic at all; but, unlike its predecessor - the Dergue regime, it dabbles in symbols of democratization, and gives a pony show with all the requisite bells and whistles, none of which at the end of the day mean or add anything of value to the lives of the Ethiopian people.

To illustrate, let us just look at the following few examples of repression perpetrated by the incumbent regime during the 14 years preceding the May 2005 failed election:

- June 1991: Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, Yishak Debrezion, Sitotaw Hussein, Amha Belete, Teklai Gebre Sellasie, Hagos Bezabih, Azanaw Demile, and other leaders and members of the opposition Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) were arrested by the TPLF/EPRDF and have since disappeared. The government continues to refuse to reveal the whereabouts of these individuals.
- December 1991: repeated attacks on Amhara ethnic members took place in Eastern and South-Western Ethiopia burning down villages and brutally murdering over 150 civilians from that group in Arba Gugu and another 46 in neighbouring areas and the Harar region. In July and August 1992, another round of attack was launched at the instigation of senior OPDO (Government affiliated) cadres. Harar in the east of the country was the site of other fierce ethnic repression. In mid-April 1992, 150

civilians were reported killed at Bedeno, many of them by being forced to jump off cliffs. The majority of those killed were again ethnic Amhara.

- 1992, Professor ASRAT WOLDE-YES, a veteran surgeon, former dean of faculty of medicine at the Addis Ababa University (AAU), and president of All Amhara Peoples Organization (AAPO) was imprisoned on fabricated charges and subsequently died owing to lack of treatment while in custody.
- On March 25, 1992, EPDRF forces opened fire on a crowd of Oromo demonstrators at Weter, also in Harar region. Different reports placed the death toll between 24 and 92
- May 1993, EPRP leader Gebre Igzibaher (alias: Gaim) was killed in Addis Ababa and at the same time Ms. Aberash Berta, Lemma Hailu, Tesfaye Kebede (all EPRP members) were detained and have since disappeared.
- January 1993 - Students at Addis Ababa University (AAU) took to the streets in protest of a planned referendum on Eritrean independence when the then Secretary General of the UN - Moutros Boutros Gali was visiting. Security forces fired live ammunition into the crowd of unarmed students killing at least six, beating and arresting large numbers of students.
- April 1993 - AAU summarily dismissed more than forty professors who had been critical of the government. Several of them have since been repeated victims of arbitrary arrest and intimidation. Ten years later, intellectuals continue to cite the "chilling effect" these firings have had on academic freedom.
- In 1996 - Ethiopian Teachers Association leaders Shimaes Zewdie and Dr. Taye Woldesmayat were arrested. Dr. Taye was subsequently sentenced to 15 years imprisonment on trumped up charges and later released after a about seven years due to pressure by Ethiopian Human rights and Opposition Groups, International Human Rights organizations and Trade Unions (Amnesty International, International Teachers Unions) and the international community ;
- On May 8, 1997: Assefa Maru, the acting president of Ethiopian Teachers' Association (ETA), and meber of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) was murdered outside of his house by government security.
- June 7, 1998: human rights activist, news paper editor and lawyer Tesfaye Tadesse, was hacked to death by government security agents outside of his home. The EPRDF has refused to account for the whereabouts of prisoners deemed "disappeared", and the murderers of Assefa Maru and Tesfaye Tadesse have not even been apprehended and/or charged.
- In 1999 massive and intensive repression in what is called "killil 3" or "Amhara killil" was documented. This includes northern Shewa, Amara Saynt, Gonder and Gojam.

- In the year 2000, a member of the legal opposition Gedeo People's Democratic Organization, Ato ABRAHAM OTE, was detained by the police on election-day in Yirgachefe town (Gedeo zone) and was forcibly prevented from contesting the election.
- December 2000 - Police responded violently to students protesting abject living conditions at Awassa Teachers College. Students were arrested, beaten and tortured.
- April 2001 - AAU students went on strike demanding academic freedom, including the rights to organize a student union and publish a student newspaper and the removal of armed police from campus. Government forces killed some 40 students and other civilians and arrested thousands, some of whom were tortured. High school, college, and university students around the country demonstrated in solidarity, and police responded to these demonstrations with excessive violence.
- On 10 March 2002 in Teppi town in the southwest, police shot dead up to 200 demonstrators of the Shekicho and Mezenger ethnic groups, who were protesting against administrative boundary changes. Over 300 were detained, including opposition party activists.
- March and April 2002, during widespread peaceful demonstrations against regional educational and taxation policies by school and college students in several towns in western Oromia region, police shot dead several demonstrators and wounded unknown number of students. There were mass arrests of demonstrators, followed by detentions of hundreds of teachers, civil servants and others accused of supporting or instigating the protests. There were reports of torture and ill-treatment of prisoners, who were held incommunicado and accused of links with the OLF.
- On 24 May 2002 in Awassa, capital of Sidama zone in the southern region, regional and federal police shot dead at least 25 people and wounded others at a demonstration that was peaceful until police shot without warning. Other police, according to some witnesses, killed two police officers as pretext to kill more civilians and/or justify the 25 already killed. Scores of demonstrators and their alleged supporters were detained in the following weeks and many were reportedly tortured. They included a medical doctor, Million Tumato, and Sidama Development Corporation director - Mengistu Gonsamo, who became prisoners of conscience.
- 2003: Persistent and reliable reports emanating from the Ogaden region of Ethiopia clearly affirmed the alarming state of human rights abuse in the whole area. The reports show that the security and armed forces of the EPRDF have carried out arbitrary killings and numerous arrests grossly violating the human rights of the people in the region.

- 2003: The authorities in Addis Abeba closed the offices of the Metcha Tulema (a 40 years old civic association, self help and development group) arrested its president Diriba Demissie and its vice president Gemetchu Feyera as well as other employees.
- Again in 2003, government security forces carried out genocide against the Annuak ethnic group in the region of Gambelela, western Ethiopia. More than 400 members of the Anuak ethnic minority were massacred in a premeditated ethnic carnage spearheaded by the armed forces of the ruling EPRDF led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. On January 8, 2004, **Genocide Watch**, a US based Human Rights group, issued a statement saying, "at least 416 Anuak people were murdered. The massacres were led by Ethiopian government troops in uniform". A 64-page report released by Human Rights Watch in March 2005, unequivocally states that: "the Ethiopian military has committed a widespread murder, rape and torture against the Anuak population in the remote south-western region of Gambella since December 2003."
- In their last 15 annual reports, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters without Borders and others have documented extensive evidence of consistent and systemic violation of freedom of the press in Ethiopia. This includes de-legitimizing and closing down the free press (newspapers and magazines), forcing journalists into exile, imprisonment of their editors without trial, the disappearing of some journalists, seizing the property of the union (Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association, EFPJA) etc.

Despite the above and many other facts, the EPRDF regime and its financial backers would like the world to believe that the reported violations of human right are isolated incidents which are mainly the result of being an "emerging democracy" and/or lack of adequate experience. Nothing can be further from the truth - the human rights violation in Ethiopia is systemic, deliberate, extensive and unabated. The trend in place is not a positive gradual improvement but a rapid deterioration of rights. The trend is not an increment in the gains of democratic rights but a rapid and consistent downward spiral of such rights. Clearly, the rhetoric and the reality of the status of human rights in Ethiopia do not match.

The May 2005 election came about as this contradiction between word and deed increasingly put the regime to the test. And from a human rights perspective, the events surrounding the election 2 years ago brought into sharp focus the growing and glaring problem between word and action. Many of the regime's foreign allies who were willing before the election to give the regime the benefit of the doubt and to let it grow incrementally into the "democratic club", later only soured on it. The fact that over 30,000 people were illegally detained and tortured and nearly 200 killed following the election disputes proved beyond the pale that the EPRDF regime is wanting in major areas of human and civil rights.

One of the major travesties that the world is witnessing today in Ethiopia is the farce trial of the leaders of the CUDP, journalists, anti poverty and human rights activists who were jailed following the mass demonstration in November 2005.

The crime of these prisoners of conscience is their persistent demand for the respect of the people's choice as expressed in the May 2005 election. Their crime is refusing to join a parliament that they believe is established by rigged votes. Today in Ethiopia, those elected by the people are in jail, have "disappeared", exiled or are in hiding while those who were defeated at the ballot box such as (Aba-dula Gameda, Bereket Simon) are in power. This is democracy in action EPRDF style.

In addition to the problems of being illegally jailed, murdered, and disappeared, there is also the problem of leaving one's country under duress. Many Ethiopians, including journalists and students, flee their country on fear of being killed or jailed because of their political beliefs. . The latest in this saga are the three judges who were members of the commission appointed to investigate the loss of life and property damage following the May election controversy. Because the judges implicated the regime in using excessive force and ordering the killing of more than 193 innocent citizens, and refusing to back down under continued intimidations, Judges Teshale Abera, Wolde-michael Meshesha, and Frehiwot Samuel were forced to flee their beloved country.

One of the huge losses the Ethiopian people incurred as a result of the May 2005 election is the forcible closure of private and independent media. As is known, an informed citizen is more capable to make proper decisions. The budding private media, despite tremendous harassment from the government, had come into its own, and was regarded by a sizable number of the citizenry as a reliable information source. That is no more. Today, the EPRDF regime is the top enemy of the press in the entire world. Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are violently repressed. There is no question today that the government is prepared to silence the Ethiopian people and keep them in the dark by any means necessary. Besides the closing of the independent media, the government is also engaged in blocking web pages that air critical views on the government's policies.

The Interference EPRDF forces in Somalia, a sovereign nation, and the subsequent gross violation of the rights of the Somali people is another extremely disturbing development in the EPRDF's glossary of the violation of rights. As we at SOCEPP indicated in a recent statement, "the invasion of Somalia by the troops of the EPRDF has led to gross human rights violations that victimize the people of Somalia. From Baidoa to Ras Kamboni the troops of the Meles Zenawi regime have killed and wounded thousands with tanks, heavy artillery and helicopter-fighter jets adding to the number of casualties.

SOCEPP unconditionally condemns the regime of prime minister Meles Zenawi for the invasion and the consequent gross human right violations taking place in Somalia. The Meles regime has turned Ethiopia itself into one human rights hell hole and cannot be expected to bring justice and peace to Somalia. True to its "nature", the EPRDF has opened fire against protesters in Mogadishu wounding and killing innocent Somalis. It is routinely violating the human rights of the Somali people and has already caused the loss of life of hundreds of Ethiopian soldiers. SOCEPP affirms that the people of Somalia and Ethiopia are brothers and sisters and that this war sabotages their future peaceful relations.

SOCEPP calls for the immediate withdrawal of the EPRDF troops from Somalia and for the immediate cessation of this intervention. The human rights of the people of Somalia must be respected. Actually, the repressive regime of Meles Zenawi has to respect the human rights of the Ethiopian people in the first place, has to release all the political prisoners, respect the rule of law, etc”

We also want to state that SOCEPP- Canada continues to be concerned about the wellbeing of Said Muktar Canadian of Ethiopian Ogaden Origin who continue to be imprisoned by EPRDF without access to legal council, visit by family and friends or Canadian embassy representatives. This is a serious violation of human rights and very disrespectful of Canadian good will to Ethiopia.

It is imperative that Mr. Said Muktar’s Human Rights including access to legal council, visit by Canadian Embassy representative, access to family and friends and medical practitioners be respected without delay. If EPRDF alleges that Said Muktar has committed crime, then it is incumbent on them to bring him to open trial with proper legal representation. Justice delayed is justice denied. We urge the Canadian government to take appropriate action in this regard.

In sum-up, the Human rights situation in Ethiopia is extremely disturbing, the violation has touched all Ethnic groups, all regions and social classes in the country. In fact, it has now spread to a sovereign neighbouring country. The action of the EPRDF is not only an attack on Ethiopians and our Somali Brothers and sisters but also an attack on humanity as a whole. Such utter disregard of the internationally established norms should be stopped before it is too late.

HOW THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY CAN HELP

The international community, particularly human rights organizations are doing a respectable job in standing with the Ethiopian victims of government repression. They should continue publicizing their plight; they could also help in holding training sessions in human rights, creating capacity to help the home-based and externally constituted Ethiopian human rights organizations and civic society groups.

As indicated earlier, we have provided some suggestions that might help the international human rights groups to collect and disseminate all-embracing human rights violations without leaving out the victims from any group. There is a need to do more work in this regard.

The human rights organizations in league with professional groups should put pressure on the Ethiopian regime to allow the functioning of a free press and independent civic society and professional groups such as the Ethiopian Teachers Association. In short it is time to put additional pressure on the EPRDF regime to respect rights.

Here in Canada we need to demand that our government, the Canadian government, continue to suspend direct budgetary support to the EPRDF government. There is no

reason why Canadian Tax payer's money should subsidize a government that does not respect international standards and the rights of its own citizens.

We should also insist that Canada use its influence to demand the release of all political prisoners, the respect of human and democratic rights and the withdrawal of the EPRDF forces from Somalia.

It is imperative that we, the defenders of human and democratic rights, cooperate and collaborate in bringing our plea to the attention of the international community. We all can benefit a lot from unity.

Thank you.

SOCEPP Canada