

ETHIOPIA: PROSPECTS FOR PEACE, DEMOCRACY AND RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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Birhanu Tsigu: former head of monitoring, research, and public litigation department at the Ethiopian Human Rights Council

I would like first to express my deepest appreciation to Congressman Payne and European Parliament Member Anna Gomes and their colleagues at both places for their untiring efforts in supporting and advocating the plight of the Ethiopian people for democracy and human rights. In particular, I had the privilege of personally observing Ms Gomes so vigorously and selflessly carrying out her duties as head of the EU delegation for election observation during the 2005 elections in Ethiopia, and it is really an honor for me to meet her again at this joint summit of the European Parliament and the US Congress.

In his State of the Union Address to the 77th US Congress on January 6, 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt enumerated freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear as the Four Fundamental Freedoms, which he asserted every human being “everywhere in the world” ought to enjoy. Seven years later in 1948, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt took up her husband’s vision of the Four Freedoms and helped its incorporation into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Similarly, the ideas of freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom to live in dignity preoccupied former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s *In Larger Freedom* report to the General Assembly in 2005, where he pointed out:

Five years into the new millennium, we have it in our power to pass on to our children a brighter inheritance than that bequeathed to any previous generation. We can halve global poverty and halt the spread of major known diseases in the next 10 years. We can reduce the prevalence of violent conflict and terrorism. We can increase respect for human dignity in every land. And we can forge a set of updated international institutions to help humanity achieve these noble goals. If we act boldly — and if we act together — we can make people everywhere more secure, more prosperous and better able to enjoy their fundamental human rights.

But that same year, the Ethiopian government sent a practical message to the Ethiopian people and the rest of the world that the achievement of these noble goals will never be an easy one, even in the new millennium. Exactly two years back from today, on June 8, 2005, special security forces acting under the direct and personal command of the Prime Minister unleashed their brute force and massacred a number of Ethiopians in the capital and other towns. Instead of the “brighter inheritance” promised to them, children like 16 year old Abraham Yilma, who was shot dead while helping his wounded brother Fekadu; 16 year old Nebeyou Alemayehu, who was shot dead while returning home from school; another 16 year old Melisachew Demissie, who was shot twice in the forehead while he was going to school to seat for his final exam for the 6th Grade; and many others received the dark bequest of death in the hands of those who were supposed to be their guardian angels.

Children and adults alike, all over the country, started to live in constant fear and terror. They are frightened not by the threat of catastrophic terrorist attacks or the possible outbreak of nuclear or biological warfare in their vicinity. They are terrified by the profuse presence of government armed men at the school gates and street corners, at the stadium and places of worship, at public and religious festivities and funeral processions; because they surely know that these armed men will never hesitate for a moment to pull the trigger if the people dared to exercise their constitutional rights of demonstration and public assembly, which, ironically, the Prime Minister banned on the night of the election.

Today, millions of Ethiopians feel like aliens in their own country. The degree of harassment and intimidation has reached such an unbearable extent that even school children wish to leave the country to wherever they might find temporary refuge from the daily beatings and bullying by the federal police. Just last week, about 22 school children who traveled to Europe for a circus show refused to return home complaining that they “live in a virtual prison in Ethiopia.” But it is not only such innocent children who want to flee the country. Especially since the showdown of the 2005 elections, scores of top level government officials including military Generals, Ambassadors and other high level diplomats, Supreme Court judges, members of parliament, journalists working in the public media and many others have continued to defect. Medical doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers and other highly trained and well experienced professionals

are also flocking out of the country, while the government obstinately continues in its insolence towards the home-grown intelligentsia. The very few public hospitals in the country are so forsaken that the Health Minister openly admitted in a recent statement that they are being forced to shut down some of their services to the public.

In fact, the number of Ethiopian refugees and asylum seekers has increased more than threefold in the period since 2005. According to the World Refugee Survey 2006 by the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), in 2006 alone more than 63,900 Ethiopians fled the country in fear of persecution by the government. Recurrent eruptions of inter-ethnic and religious conflicts have also generated a population of around 265, 000 internally displaced people (IDPs).

Today, freedom of the press and freedom of expression had gone to ruin in Ethiopia. Epitomizing this fact, until recently Ethiopia has been ranked first among jailors of journalists around the world. Nearly all of the independent press that was starting to take root in the past few years has been wiped out and the journalists are either jailed or forced to flee the country. Owners of printing houses were warned by the Minister of Justice and other security officials against receiving printing jobs from the private press. The few blog spots and Ethiopian news websites operating from outside the country are blocked to readers in the country. The electronic media is still under the monopoly of the government and its affiliates. The government has done virtually everything under its power to deny the broader public their right to information and to freedom of expression. The public media is primarily engaged in disseminating hateful messages against certain political groups, civil society organizations, and their leaders who openly oppose the political and economic policies of the government.

Because of the divisive and intrusive policy of the government, bloody religious conflicts have repeatedly occurred in recent times among believers who harmoniously lived together for centuries. The September 26, 2006 bloodshed in Jimma during the Christian festival of *Ye Meskel Demera* (Eve of the Finding of the True Cross) was clearly an outcome of the government's policy of fanning religious intolerance among the various religious communities who peacefully co-existed for generations. During the campaigns for the 2005 elections, the government deliberately introduced religion into politics, portraying some opposition groups as anti-Muslim, thereby encouraging a climate of mistrust and suspicion to grow. The government's

uncalled-for meddling in the internal affairs of the various religious communities has also resulted in internal divisions and violent conflicts that brought loss of human lives both among the Ethiopian Muslims and among the Orthodox Christians.

Likewise, inter-ethnic conflicts have intensified over the years ever since the introduction of ethnical federalism in the country. This policy has set the condition for violent conflicts by encouraging old grievances to resurrect and retaliations to predominate relations among different communities in the country. The government has not only failed to prevent such violence from breaking out, but it also directly and actively took part in some of them. The May 24, 2002 Awassa Massacre and the December 2003 Gambella Massacre are indisputable examples of the direct involvement of government troops in the shooting of hundreds of innocent members of the Sidama and Agnuak communities in the south and west of the country, respectively.

It is obvious that these deplorable acts of the regime in Ethiopia, added with the misguided policies it follows, denied a chance for democracy to take root in the country. Furthermore, the little progress achieved over the last decade and a half was upturned by the post-2005 incidents of widespread human rights violations and the relentless dismantling of institutions indispensable for democracy, like opposition parties, the free press and civil society.

The apathetic reaction of the international community towards the horrendous acts that followed the May 2005 elections in Ethiopia seems to have sent the wrong signals both to the despotic regime, by making it to believe that it can get away with its mischief; and to the broader public, who put its trust in the possibility of a peaceful and democratic transition, but now who feels to have been cheated and betrayed. It is not uncommon now a days to hear some Ethiopians at home and abroad expressing their frustration and despair at the ineptness of the peaceful struggle for democracy and human rights in Ethiopia. Since the debacle of the 2005 elections, there is a marked rise in armed movements in the Oromia, Somali, Afar, Tigray, Amhara and Gambella regions of the country.

But violence breeds violence; and it only helps repressive regimes to prolong their lives by giving them the excuse to crush any form of opposition to their power through the use of force. Europe and America have the economic, political and diplomatic resources that can rescue the

situation in Ethiopia from degenerating to a gloomier state than it already is in now. It is a truism to state that the ultimate responsibility of securing freedom and democracy for themselves lies in the hands of fellow Ethiopians. But unwavering international support and solidarity with the people of Ethiopia in securing the unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience, the full and effective compensation of victims, and the bringing to justice of perpetrators, will definitely bolster the effort towards the achievement of the Four Freedoms and more. A clear statement by the US and member states of the EU that there can never be true partnership between democracy and tyranny will help to tone down the obstinacy of the Ethiopian government in refusing to enter into a political dialogue with other political groups in the country. Such support is crucial in helping shorten the road to democracy and minimize the sacrifices the Ethiopian people need to pay before reaching there.

I thank you all.