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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa (HRLHA), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Human Rights violation in Ethiopia

Executive Summary

This report covers mainly the human rights abuse issues in Ethiopia which have happened in the past twenty- two years since the EPRDF/TPLF Government came to power in 1991 after the fall of the dictatorial military government.

The report identifies evidence of arbitrary arrests and detention, abductions and disappearances all of which these activities have targeted free press journalists, opposition party leaders, and high school and university students and has caused the illegal eviction of farmers from their farm land.

Introduction

The Ethiopian people and all the remote and close friends of Ethiopia around the world expected a profound change when the Military Dictator's government was toppled and the EPRDF came to power in 1991. But the change the people hoped for didn't come. Ethiopians are still unable to detach themselves from authoritarian rules and the resultant miseries such as gross human rights violation, underdevelopment, poverty and starvation, despite the sacrifices they had paid in the last two or so decades to bring about government change under which citizens rights are respected, equal job opportunities are available for everyone. Today, thousands of young university graduate students are unable to find jobs in Ethiopia. Jobs are available only for those graduates who are either members of the ruling party (EPRDF) or those who filled EPRDF membership forms when they graduated. Even famine and starvation, which have become synonymous with the name Ethiopia, and which have been the major reasons for the downfall of the last two previous government, have continued to occur to a larger extent than in the past, threatening the lives of millions of Ethiopians. Once again, the recurring famine and all its components are being blamed on the lack of adequate rain and the irregularity of seasons. But bizarrely, however, some responsible foreign states are leasing agricultural lands in Ethiopia to grow crops, and feed their own peoples. How can it be that Ethiopians are yet again caught up in the cycle of poverty and starvation, when foreign states look towards Ethiopia to ensure the food security of their own countries? To us, the answer to this question has a lot to do with basic and fundamental human rights.

Human rights violations in Ethiopia are gross and widespread. But, due to the limited space allotted for this submission, we would like to focus on the components we believe those are most determinant.

Freedom of Expression in Ethiopia

Everyone knows that informed consent is the essence of any genuine democracy; and that freedom of expression is the most basic and fundamental human right that is needed for the realization of all other rights.

However, Press freedom in Ethiopia is said to be regulated by the vaguely defined Press Proclamation NO. 590/2008, A Proclamation to provide for freedom of the mass media and access to information¹, which government officials abuse to the maximum by

¹ Proclamation No.590/2008, A Proclamation to provide for freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information, <http://unpan1.un.org/intrdoc/groups/public/documents/un-dpadm/unpan043814.pdf>

subordinating it to the Ethiopian “Terrorism Proclamation of 2009²” in order to intimidate and harass journalists as well as publishers. Media practitioners in Ethiopia face treason and terrorism charges simply because they put pen to paper to allow ordinary citizens to exercise their freedom of expression. Many journalists and publishers have been subjected to repeated long-term imprisonment and prohibitive fines. For example, journalists Eskindir Nega, Reeyot Alemu and Wubshet Taye were sentenced in the same year (2012) to 18, and 14 by the Ethiopian high court for the reports they made in their newspaper. Even bail able charges require depositing a huge amount of money, which in most cases cannot be afforded. Fearing the treason charge and detention more than 79 journalists have fled the country from 2001-2013 according to CPJ’s report in February 2013.

Internet connections in Ethiopia are among the weakest in the world. This is not because Ethiopians cannot afford the connection fees. It is rather part of the denial of access to any source of information by the government-controlled Ethiopian Telecommunications Authority, the only Internet service provider that has been allowed to exist.

Ethiopia has banned by law- in 2012- Skype and other Voice-over –internet Protocol (VoIP) services that offer audio related communications. Breaking the law is punishable by 15 years in prison.

Democratic Rights

International and regional instruments and as well as the Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 article 30 (1 & 2) and 31(1 & 2)³ protect number of key rights relating to freedom of association and assembly.

However, in today’s Ethiopia the government has no tolerance for accommodating peaceful demonstrations and assemblies of any kind. In the past five years, peaceful demands by students in Universities for improving learning and teaching environments in different campuses ended up in the taking of thousands of students to prison, with hundreds dismissed from their education⁴.

In the past two years, Ethiopian police and security services have harassed, assaulted, and arbitrarily arrested hundreds of Muslim Ethiopians all over the country who were protesting government interference in religious affairs⁵. By doing that, the Ethiopian Government has breached the fundamental rights of its citizens to believe in any religion of their choice, a right enshrined in the Ethiopian constitution of 1995 Article 11(3) Separation of State and Religion, which states “The state shall not interfere in religious matters and religion shall not interfere in state affairs”.

Political Freedom

The whole world again witnessed another nominal election result in 2010 in which the ruling party (EPRDF) announced its winner with a 99.6% majority. This came after the tragedy of the 2005 election where hundreds of Ethiopians paid the maximum price simply for attempting to exercise their basic political rights by voting for and supporting those

² Proclamation No. 652/2009 , A Proclamation On Anti-Terrorism,
<http://chilot.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/anti-terrorism.pdf>

³ Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1995,
http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=193667

⁴ Kidnappings and Disappearances of Students in Southern Ethiopia,
<http://gadaa.com/oduu/17688/2013/01/06/ethiopia-beatings-arrests-and-detentions-at-addis-ababa-university-hrlha-urgent-action/>

⁵ Prominent Muslims Detained in Crackdown in Ethiopia,
<http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/15/ethiopia-prominent-muslims-detained-crackdown>

whom they trusted. The ruling party lost to the opposition parties. The consequence was including political leaders, human rights activists, journalists and publishers, faced extra-judicial apprehensions and imprisonment.

From what we have witnessed so far in Ethiopia, we could undoubtedly say that even being perceived as a sympathizer of an opposition group makes an individual vulnerable to incremental persecution, up to and including loss of jobs (in the case of civil servants), denial of the right to work, extra-judicial arrests and long periods of detention with or without trial, torture, and even disappearances and extrajudicial killings, etc. Most Ethiopians have learned that attempts at freely, openly, and peacefully opposing the ruling EPRDF party are a life-threatening undertaking. Even members of the legally operating political parties and organizations have been and are facing the same fates for engaging in politics and expressing their political beliefs. Many opposition political leaders have been sentenced under Ethiopian terrorist law in the past two years. Among them are Bekele Gerba, the vice chair of Oromo Federalist Movement, Olbana Lelissa, the Secretary of Oromo People Congress party, Andualem Arage the Medir party leader (Life in prison).

Land Grabbing as a Human Rights Violation

Today, millions of small landowners in Ethiopia who had been the backbone of the country's economy for a century have been denied their right to own property. Thousands are forcefully evicted without their consent and compensation in Oromia regional State, Gambela region in the south and Benishangule region, dismissed from their ancestral farmlands and their land have been given to Trans National Corporations (TNC) ⁶ which caused thousands of family heads to become jobless along with their family members. Others who resisted the forced evictions were rounded up by the Government security forces and taken into custody, and accused as terrorists.

In this case, the Ethiopian Government denied the rights to property of the citizens, a right which is enshrined in the Constitution of the country- Article 40(1-8) which guarantees every Ethiopian citizen the right to ownership of private property, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 17(1 &2) which states, "(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others, (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property

Recommendations:

- The Ethiopian Government first of all must respect and implement the rights of citizens enshrined in the constitution of the country (1995) and enforce the Ethiopian penal code of 2004
- The Ethiopian Government must abide by all International human rights instruments to which the country is a signatory
- The Ethiopian Government must rescind the terrorist and civil society proclamations which it uses to criminalize innocent citizens who are trying to practice their basic and fundamental rights.

⁶ Food crisis and the global land grab Documentary Planet for Sale2,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=IU1-PpxqeZc#!