



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association, 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.

[04 June 2020]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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## The freedom of opinion and expression in Ethiopia

### Students' academic freedoms are threatened by tension

Although the Ethiopian authorities have released a number of academics imprisoned for several years, the country has recently experienced some setbacks that could threaten this progress. Perhaps the most prominent event is what happened in January 2020. And according to a report published by the Ethiopian Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the protests broke out inside 22 universities has caused 35,000 students to quit class. The ministry stated that it had taken several disciplinary measures against more than 640 students and 40 teachers, as part of measures to combat unrest in various Ethiopian universities.<sup>1</sup>

Ethiopia has around 30 million learners in Ethiopian schools and nearly a million in the 50 public universities and more than 250 private academic institutions, all of which represent high potential transmission sites.<sup>2</sup> Those students, freshman students or otherwise, will have to sign an agreement with district-level education offices in the areas where they (and their parents) live.

The Ministry has prepared a form which will be filled out by students and their parents, and submit it to the education office in their areas of residence. Freshman, Junior or senior level university students will not be admitted to for the academic year if they do not produce filled out, signed and stamped form. The ministry has made it clear that it will hold both parents and students for wrongdoings that will negatively impact peace and security in the universities.<sup>3</sup> Although most college students are of legal age (18 years according to the constitution), the new regulation holds parents accountable for actions committed by students.

### Blocking the Internet... Back to the repressive methods

Despite Article 29 of the Ethiopian Constitution which stipulates that, "Everyone has the right to hold opinions without harassment,"<sup>4</sup> Ethiopia continues to cut off internet services muzzling freedom of expression since 2016, and in 2019, internet was interrupted four times, under the cloak of national security, quelling rising protests, controlling strikes, and exam cheating.<sup>5</sup> In August 2019, Ethiopia's Prime Minister said that if deadly unrest in the country continues with online incitement, internet in the country could be cut off "forever."<sup>6</sup>

Since January 3, 2020, the authorities have disconnected mobile phone networks, landlines, and internet services in western Oromia's Kelleme Wellega, West Wellega, and Horo Gudru Wellega zones. The shutdown has been imposed in areas under federal military control and comes amid reports of government military operations against the armed wing of the once-banned Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).<sup>7</sup>

Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights believes that this measure shows that the Ethiopian government is ready to return to the same repressive tools once used by the late

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<sup>1</sup> "Unrest in universities forces 35,000 students to quit class", Xinhua News Agency, 24 January 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3dCjhTg>

<sup>2</sup> "Lessons from the shutdown – How one university responded", UWN, 26 March 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2Uo144e>

<sup>3</sup> "Ethiopia introduced new university admission rule as a security measure", September 24, 2019, borkena, available at: <https://bit.ly/2QTc4UV>

<sup>4</sup> Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 21 August 1995, available at: <http://bit.ly/35UfooK>

<sup>5</sup> Yohannes Eneyew Ayalew, "The Internet shutdown muzzle(s) freedom of expression in Ethiopia: competing narratives", 20 May 2019, available at: <http://bit.ly/2pNyY5q>

<sup>6</sup> "Ethiopia will cut internet as and when, 'it's neither water nor air' - PM Abiy", Africa News, 02/08/2019, available at: <http://bit.ly/2W6it0w>

<sup>7</sup> Ethiopia: Communications Shutdown Takes Heavy Toll", HRW, March 9, 2020, <http://bit.ly/2IPLV5j>

authority to deal with problems, opening the door to the possibility of using the same repressive tools to freedom of opinion, expression and academic freedoms.

## Harassment of media and journalists in Ethiopia... political rivalries

On July 22, 2019, at least 25 people were killed in clashes between Ethiopian security forces and activists in southern Ethiopia, during the protests across the Sidama region. Activists from the Sidama ethnic group were set to declare their own federal state through holding a referendum on the issue.<sup>8</sup>

It should be noted that in October 2019, security forces surrounded the house of the journalist Jawar Muhammad,<sup>9</sup> the government tried to withdraw his security clearance.<sup>10</sup> Jawar is a media entrepreneur, enjoying an active presence on social media, and his Facebook account is followed by about 1.75 million people, highlighting his quick ability to organize the protests.<sup>11</sup>

On October 23, 2019, police fired gunshots and teargas to break up demonstrations in Ethiopia, and some residents said that protests quickly spread to other parts of the capital and to the cities of Adama, Ambo, Harar and Jimma. Four people were reportedly shot in Ambo. On Friday, October 25, 2019, the death toll reached 67. This is a dangerous escalation by the Ethiopian authorities against media entrepreneurs and bloggers, and it contradicts the ongoing claims of the current authority to guarantee freedom of opinion and expression. It is unacceptable to use repression against such peaceful demonstrators, which calls for a real and transparent investigation of local and international public opinion. Especially since this behavior is not commensurate with a Prime Minister receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. There is no peace consistent with the suppression of the demonstrators by those methods that were used by the last authority.

On February 17, 2020, the police in Ethiopia launched an attack on opposition party supporters in the Oromia Region on Saturday, killing one person and arresting and injuring scores more. Later, the Oromia Liyu police raided the inauguration of an Oromia Liberation Front (OLF) office in Welenchiti, firing live bullets and tear gas, killing one OLF supporter who was a clothes vendor.<sup>12</sup>

After the outbreak of the Coronavirus (Covid 19) and the imposition of a state of emergency in the country to combat it,<sup>13</sup> the government took advantage of the situation to restrict freedom of expression and opinion. On March 27, 2020, the "Federal Police" arrested "Yaesu Shimelis" after publishing a report about the Coronavirus on his Facebook account and YouTube channel. He was condemned by Ethiopia's national Ministry of Health over his claims that the Ethiopian government had told religious leaders to prepare 200,000 graves to accommodate deaths from the virus.<sup>14</sup> In the week before his arrest, he had been receiving calls from federal security personnel questioning him about an interview he had had with a former Ethiopian foreign minister.

<sup>8</sup> Ethiopia referendum: Dozens killed in Sidama clashes", BBC, 22 July 2019, <https://bbc.in/39CWtQM>

<sup>9</sup> لجدير بالذكر أنه حتى 10 مايو 2020 أي بعد خمسة أشهر من تصويت سكان منطقة سيداما، يشعر العديد من سكان سيداما بالقلق من التأخيرات غير الدستورية في نقل السلطة من منطقة الأمم الجنوبية إلى الولاية الفيدرالية الجديدة. وقيل ذلك في 30 أبريل و1 مايو، اختطف رئيس الأمن في منطقة سيداما والشرطة الإقليمية الخاصة بالعديد من علماء ونشطاء ومدنيين بارزين في سيداما، وأساءوا معاملتهم في مقاطعات حواسا، ودالي، ولوكا عباية، ولم يمنحهم أي إجراءات قانونية.

<sup>10</sup> يحمل جواز سفر أمريكا، هو ناشط من عرق الأورومو الذي يمثل أكبر عرقية في البلاد. انتقده بعض الإثيوبيين لاستخدامه لغة مشوبة بالعرقية لكن الكثير من شباب الأورومو يعتبرونه بطلا أحدث التغيير السياسي الذي أدى لتعيين أبي أحمد العام الماضي رئيسا للوزراء

<sup>11</sup> Simon Marks, "Protests in Ethiopia Threaten to Mar Image of Its Nobel-Winning Leader", The New York Times, Oct. 23, 2019, available at: <https://nyti.ms/32NeQiA>

<sup>12</sup> Ethiopia: Vendor killed, musician injured after police attack opposition supporters in Oromia", Amnesty International, 17 February 2020, available at: <http://bit.ly/2IwUDoP>

<sup>13</sup> الجدير بالذكر أن أي شخص يتبين أنه ينتهك قيود الطوارئ يواجه ما يصل إلى 3 سنوات في السجن أو غرامات تصل إلى (6149 دولار أمريكي).

<sup>14</sup> Ethiopian journalist Yeyesew Shimelis detained following COVID-19 report", April 02, 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3cvibHZ>

## **Recommendations**

Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights recommends stakeholders the following:

- Investigate all cases of violence in universities, and announce the results of investigations immediately to the public opinion.
  - The need to find more innovative solutions to face examinations leakage, to stop shutting down the internet in the country, for jeopardizing freedom of opinion, expression and academic freedom.
  - The Ethiopian government must abide by the 2016 United Nations Human Rights Council resolution urging states to respect rights on the internet.
  - Stop abusing the new emergency law to further suppress freedom of opinion and expression for journalists and media professionals.
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