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“Ethiopia After Meles: The Future of Democracy and Human Rights”

Good Morning Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Distinguished Members of the House Africa Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. It is indeed a great honor and privilege to have the opportunity to appear before you to discuss issues related to the future of Democracy and Human Rights in Ethiopia.

1. The State of Human Rights and Democratization in Ethiopia

As you are aware Mr. Chairman, Ethiopia’s human rights record is abysmal by all accounts and continues to deteriorate. The current regime, which has been in power for the last 21 years, continues to engage in the systematic violation of international standards with regard to fundamental human rights. The most significant assault on human rights include restrictions on:

- 1) Freedom of expression;
- 2) Freedom of association and political rights;
- 3) Interference in religious affairs;
- 4) Ethnic cleansing against Amharas and the forced displacement of indigenous people from ancestral lands;
- 5) Manipulation of the justice system for politically motivated charges and trials

Following the death of Meles Zenawi, many hoped that there would be an opportunity for an opening in the political space. However the current regime continues to flout international standards. Indeed, the climate post the much-

anticipated National Elections of 2005, widely acknowledged as the most contested election in Ethiopian history, culminating in bloodshed and vote rigging, has produced severe government clampdown on basic freedoms, particularly freedom of expression and association, increased police monitoring of peaceful and lawful activities, arbitrary arrest of human rights defenders, opposition leaders and attacks on civil society.

With the passage of the draconian Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law) and Anti-Terrorism law in 2009, independent civil society and non-governmental organizations NGOs (domestic and international) have been forced to cease their operation due to these very restrictive new laws, effectively criminalizing internationally recognized rights.¹

The brazen and relentless assault on free expression and access to information, arbitrary detention of human rights activists, civil society and opposition leaders has severely compromised the electoral environment in Ethiopia. There is little independent criticism and virtually no political opposition in the country.

Freedom of Expression

The Ethiopian government censors free speech by routinely blocking websites, closing publishing houses, confiscating newspapers, imprisoning journalists and jamming international media such as the Voice of America (VOA) as well as diaspora based independent media such as Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT). Journalists, brave enough to practice their trade with integrity risk imprisonment.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Ethiopia is the leading jailer of journalists in Sub-Sahara Africa and ranks among the top ten in the World. Among the most noted journalists languishing in jail are award winning Columnist /blogger Eskinder Nega², the recipient of the 2012 PEN/Barbara

¹ <http://www.boell.de/worldwide/africa/africa-closure-heinrich-boell-foundation-office-ethiopia-background-16060.html>

² <http://www.pen.org/press-release/2012/04/12/top-pen-prize-honor-eskinder-nega-jailed-ethiopian-journalist-and-blogger>

Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award and Reyot Alemu³, winner of the 2013 UNESCO-Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize. Last year, the International Women's Media Foundation bestowed Courage in Journalism Award on Ms. Alemu in absentia.

Two Swedish journalists (freed in 2012) who entered the country illegally to report on the ongoing conflict in the Ogaden were among the imprisoned journalists.⁴

Ethiopia also ranks 3rd in the world in terms of countries from which journalists have fled, with 49 journalists that have been exiled as a result of government persecution and iron fisted control of the independent media.⁵

The widespread international condemnations and repeated calls from various rights groups and influential Parliamentarians for the release of Ethiopian journalists have been completely ignored by the regime in power.⁶

Continued U.S. support of a regime that represses a free press is also in violation of its own constitutional guarantee of the right to free speech. It is clear that the Ethiopian people need information to make informed participatory decisions about their form of government, leaders and lives. Effectiveness of access to a free press cannot be evaluated until such time as the people have the right to free media.

Freedom of Association and Political Rights

Political space has been severely curtailed in Ethiopia. So much so, that in the Parliamentary Election of 2010, which was conducted in an environment that

³ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/witw/articles/2013/04/18/reeyot-alemu-ethiopia-s-jailed-truth-teller.html>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19960209>

⁵ <http://www.cpj.org/2013/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2012-ethiopia.php>

⁶ <http://www.freedom-now.org/news/for-immediate-release-16-members-of-the-european-parliament-call-for-the-release-of-imprisoned-ethiopian-journalist-eskinder-nega/>

was not conducive to free and fair elections, the ruling party “won” by a jaw-dropping 99.6%. As a result, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) controls 545 of the 547 seat in Parliament to remain in power until 2015. The 2010 election gives ample evidence that Ethiopia is an authoritarian dictatorship that holds sham elections every 5 years and has failed to develop democratic institutions in the two decades that EPRDF has been in power.⁷

By all reasonable accounts, EPRDF has been rolling back the clock to the country’s dictatorial Derg era. The regime remains extremely suspicious of popular participation and even more so of party politics. It has successfully excluded, imprisoned, or exiled many who could possibly challenge its authority. The ruling party continues to command an unchecked monopoly on the military and security forces. Under these stifling conditions and with very little chance for political reform, the prospects for genuine democracy in Ethiopia remains bleak.

The death of Meles, last year, has not changed the nature of the one party state that he carefully and brutally constructed. In the recent 2013 nationwide local election, the ruling party ran by itself to “win” almost all of the 3.8 million supposedly contested seats. 96% of the candidates were from the ruling party and the remaining 4% from its affiliated parties. The opposition didn’t even compete in the election. The “independent” election board called it “a confirmation of the maturity of democratization in the country.”

Interference in Religious Affairs

Article 27 of the Ethiopian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and delineates the strict separation of church and state. However, the Ethiopian regime in contravention to its own constitution has consistently interfered in the affairs of both the Christian and Muslim religions. The government has effectively used the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as a tool for political control by manipulating the leadership of the powerful church. This included election of the former Patriarch Abune Paulos and the new Patriarch Abune Mathias. This gross interference in the affairs of the Orthodox Church has resulted in an unfortunate split of the Holy

⁷ http://www.eueom.eu/files/pressreleases/english/final-report-eueom-ethiopia-08112010_en.pdf

Synod into two competing power centers inside Ethiopia and in the diaspora with the influential Orthodox Church in Ethiopia aligning itself with the EPRDF regime.

Religious leaders (Orthodox, Muslim, Protestant, and others) are often pressured to issue broadcasted statements and messages of support for major EPRDF actions, with the government seeking support of their religious communities.⁸

In 2012, the regime put forth plans to build a sugar factory, sugar cane plantation and an irrigation dam on the property of the Waldeba Monastery in Gondar –Northern Ethiopia, one of the holiest sites in Orthodox Christendom. In order to make way for the construction, the regime brazenly desecrated grave sites and destroyed three historical churches on the grounds of the famous Monastery.

Monks who reside on the property were forcibly removed to make way for this massive project. The unprecedented assault on the monastic community's way of life and its religious learning centers is deeply disturbing and reprehensible. Even the communist Derg regime respected the sanctity of the Waldeba Monastery and in no way interfered in its internal affairs. Even when the monks were resisting this forced eviction and desecration, the church hierarchy was compelled to officially condone the actions of the government.

Ethiopian Muslims as well have been engaged in peaceful protest against government interference in their religious affairs since 2011. The leaders of the peaceful protests accuse the Ethiopian government of trying to impose the al-Ahbash Islamic sect on the country's Muslim community, which traditionally practices the Sufi form of Islam.

The opposition to Ahbash by Ethiopian Muslims is not particularly theological. The protesters oppose the blatant interference of the state in their religion by officially sponsoring the movement, providing finance, and forcing the Islamic Council to adopt this version of Islam, while attacking the more popular and local variant as tainted with “extremist” views with a political agenda.⁹

⁸ <http://news.yahoo.com/ethiopia-elects-leader-orthodox-church-172547906.html>

⁹ <http://www.irinnews.org/report/96787/>

Instead of resolving the conflict peacefully, the regime resorted to a brutal crackdown against the peaceful protestors by arresting their leaders and closing their newspaper. Human Rights Watch (HRW) has strongly denounced the politically motivated detention and trial of the Muslim leaders.¹⁰ Such brazen interference on religion is bound to have serious consequences to the stability of the country in the future.

Ethnic Cleansing of Amharas and Forced Displacement of Indigenous People From Ancestral Lands

Article 32 of the Ethiopian Constitution guarantees freedom of movement within the national territory. Ethiopia is also a signatory to several conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which, clearly state that a citizen has the right to work and live in any part of his or her country.

However, ethnic Amharas have been subjected to forcible eviction from Guraferda Bench-Maji in Southern Regional State as well as from Beni Shangul regions of Western Ethiopia since 2012. Targeting Amharas, one of the largest ethnic groups in Ethiopia, for illegal deportation, is a barbaric act that will have dire consequences for fostering ethnic harmony in Ethiopia. Stoking hatred will only serve to destabilize the country.

¹⁰ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/02/ethiopia-muslim-protesters-face-unfair-trial>;

<http://www.voanews.com/content/muslim-protests-ethiopia-reveal-religious-fault-lines/1452546.html>;

<http://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases/3859-1182012-uscirf-statement-uscirf-deeply-concerned-by-emerging-religious-freedom-violations-in-ethiopia.html>;

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2013/0214/Ethiopia-airs-jihadi-film-amid-sensitive-Muslim-protest-trial>

In interviews with ESAT, victims, mostly women and children, provided horrific details about being dragged from their homes with nothing else but the clothes on their back. Although the exact number of displaced families is hard to come by due to news black outs, the estimates are in the high thousands according to clandestine radio interviews with some victims.¹¹

Displacement of indigenous people is rampant in Afar, Gambella and Omo regions as a result of ancestral lands being sold to investors by the government without compensation or even a modicum of consultation with the affected population. The unprecedented land giveaway is also taking place, at a massive scale, mainly in the lowlands of Ethiopia where the country's minority ethnic groups and pastoralists live. These forced displacements of indigenous people are in contravention of most recognized human rights standards.

Human Rights Watch has documented in its report that the land grabs are being carried out in contravention of domestic and international human rights standards and without meaningful consultation, consent, or compensation for loss of land, livelihoods, food security, and access to vital subsistence resources.¹²

The Oakland Institute, an influential and highly respected think tank, has issued a comprehensive report on the land grab issue and its consequences on vulnerable communities in Ethiopia.¹³

¹¹ [http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/04/11/ethiopia-accused-of-ethnic-cleansing-over-mass-amhara-evictions/;](http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/04/11/ethiopia-accused-of-ethnic-cleansing-over-mass-amhara-evictions/)

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2012/af/204120.htm>

¹² <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/06/18/ethiopia-pastoralists-forced-their-land-sugar-plantations;>

http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/ethiopia0112webwcover_0.pdf

¹³ <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/land-deals-africa-ethiopia>

Manipulation of the Justice System for Politically Motivated Charges and Trials

Article 78 of the Ethiopian constitution promulgates the establishment of an independent Judiciary. In reality, the judiciary is the most politicized branch of the government with loyal, hand-picked judges that serve as the hand maiden of the regime. The justice system has been used time and again as a tool of “persecution by prosecution” of real and perceived political enemies of the regime. Most Ethiopians have little confidence in the impartiality and neutrality of the judiciary and it is widely regarded as an institution that has become a mere extension of ruling party power.

2. The Possibility of Reforms after Meles

The potential for reforms under the current government, which forms the second part of this discussion, is at once very critical as well as potentially controversial because a discussion about the future by its very nature is speculative. In my mind, this issue has two parts. The first is my own assessment of the possibility of internally driven reform initiated by the current regime. As I will detail in a minute, I don’t believe such reform is possible. So the second issue is a follow up to the first, in case my response is in the negative. If no reform, what is going to happen in the near future? Let me address both of these issues candidly.

Much as I wish, I don’t see the possibility of an internally driven (by the ruling party) reform leading to a genuine democratic dispensation in Ethiopia. The regime has much to lose through such a reform. The ruling elite have committed too many human rights crimes (in the Ogaden, in Addis Ababa, Oromia...etc.) and have accumulated too much wealth through rampant corruption. Indeed, they have antagonized the population too much to feel that they can continue to enjoy a peaceful life after relinquishing power--which would be inevitable if there was to be a truly free and fair election. Instead, they believe that they can somehow survive through total repression, in so far as they can get the foreign aid resources as well as the diplomatic support that would help them keep the lid on any potential resistance to their power.

The only change that Meles’ death has brought to this situation is that it has revealed the tenuous nature of this calculation as it has brought to the open the internal conflict and bickering within the ruling coalition. In the absence of Meles’ clever manipulation of the international community, it is not entirely clear how

long the West will be willing to bankroll a regime as the instability starts to publicly manifest itself.

This takes me to the second part of this issue. So, what is going to happen if there is no possibility of reform coming from the government? Would Ethiopians simply accept tyranny and live this humiliating existence indefinitely? If I know anything about the Ethiopian character, that is one bet that I am not willing to take. That is why, unfortunately, my assessment is rather pessimistic. I think the government's capacity for total suppression is going to be challenged rather dramatically in the near future. Even if the government can put a lid on the urban based opposition to its rule (which could have led to a potentially peaceful transition), its only effect is going to be to further legitimize an armed resistance against its rule.

Of course, armed resistance against the regime is not new. From the Ogaden to Afar and Gambella there are all kinds of armed opposition groups that are waging low intensity armed struggle against the regime. All these, however, were more narrowly based and without a broad societal appeal to mobilize a unified opposition across the country. Most people opposed to the regime, until recently, believed that a peaceful resistance, led by the legal opposition, could lead towards peaceful change and that this is the preferred outcome as it avoids potential bloodshed.

But, as the government simply refuses to reform, intensifies its repression, deliberately decimates the legal opposition and continues to antagonize people in all parts of the country, armed resistance has become an acceptable form of struggle. In some parts of the country aggrieved people have started to simply go into the bushes, without even taking an organized form. Furthermore, the various armed groups have started to seriously talk about unifying their actions and their vision for a democratic future, as the public's attention shifts from the "peaceful opposition" to the armed groups as their last best hope for ending the humiliation and freeing themselves from tyranny

3. What Can the US and Its Allies Do to Engender Reform?

The Ethiopian regime has created a stifling environment wherein those within the prison walls and those outside of them are terrorized by the brutal acts of a regime that has continuously been censured by respected rights groups for its lack of adherence to international human rights standards.

Ethnicity permeates politics and the ruling party has been unable and unwilling to create a broader political base in this complex and diverse country. The leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the dominant force within the governing EPRDF coalition came to power by winning a civil war, therefore its leaders believe in the importance of force. They also believe in strong political control, limited popular participation, and crony capitalism that allows for a strong presence of the state in the economy to distribute rent among the political elite.

The regime uses this ill-gotten wealth to hire PR firms and Lobbyists in the West, particularly in the United States, to promote Ethiopia's image as a modern and modernizing country under TPLF/EPRDF tutelage. The message is repeated and consistent at various international forums where officials speak at great length of Ethiopia's virtues -- its steady economic growth, its supposed political stability and its bright future. However, none of these virtues is real.

Present day Ethiopia is not a confident, growing, dynamic, modern country. Rather, it's fast becoming a police state ruled by a regime that is weak, fearful, paranoid and intolerant of dissent. A democratic multi-party system, enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia adopted in 1994 remains an empty rhetoric as long as TPLF (with its affiliates) is determined to remain the "ruling party for life." The government is skilled at using the rhetoric of democracy and good governance in order to assure the continuation of support by the international donor community, but such statements rarely lead to tangible reform.

Even if we accept the Ethiopian government's dubious and controversial claims of rapid economic growth in the past decade¹⁴ Ethiopia remains ranked among the poorest and least developed countries in the world. In the 2012 Human Development Index, Ethiopia ranked 173 out of 186 countries. The so-called economic growth has not filtered down to the poorest people in Ethiopia that are

¹⁴ B.Nega "No Shortcut to Stability: Democratic Accountability and Sustainable Development in Ethiopia
Social Research Vol.77, No.4:Winter 2010

mired in abject poverty. Corruption is rampant and the scope of Ethiopia's capital flight is frightening.

According to a recent report by Global Financial Integrity, Ethiopia lost \$11.7 Billion to outflows of ill-gotten gains between 2000 and 2009.¹⁵ One of the authors of the report, Sarah Freitas, wrote, "*The people of Ethiopia are being bled dry, no matter how hard they try to fight their way out of absolute destitution and poverty, they will be swimming upstream against the current of illicit capital leakage.*" The level of illicit leakage out of the country reached a mind blowing \$5.6 Billion in 2010 alone, a sum greater than the value of the country's total exports combined with the total foreign aid it received from abroad for that year.

As further testament to the unwillingness of the regime to democratize the country, the TPLF has engaged repeatedly in electoral corruption and brutal repression. It rules effectively by force and has consolidated its power at the expense of the overwhelming majority of Ethiopia's large and diverse population. The repressive stability that exists in Ethiopia today is detrimental to the long term internal as well as regional stability of the Horn of Africa.

Clearly, this state of affairs cannot continue. If it does, it can only end in a massive conflict with a potential to destabilize the whole region. Something must be done urgently to avoid a looming disaster. So, what can the US do to change this trajectory? In my view, the obvious starting point is to acknowledge the fact that the current policy of "constructive engagement" with this brutal regime has not worked to produce the desired results of stability in the country and the wider region. Instead, it has emboldened the regime to continue to do what it has been doing in the past. A reconstructed policy for Ethiopia, I believe, should be anchored in both the core values of the United States, as well as on the basis of strategic national security considerations. I submit that both of these considerations require that Ethiopia become an internally peaceful, stable and democratic country that contributes positively to the stability of the region. If this is a reasonable policy position consistent with US long term strategic interests, then there is a lot

¹⁵ http://blogs.wsj.com/corruption-currents/2011/12/05/ethiopian-illicit-outflows-doubled-in-2009-new-report-says/?mod=google_news_blog

that the US and its allies can do to push the current regime to move in that direction.

Ethiopia suffers from an absence of democracy and the United States Government has received multiple reports of the dictatorial nature of the Ethiopian government. US-Ethiopia relationship should be based on democratic governance, respect for the rule of law and the promotion and protection of human rights. Support for democracy, respect for fundamental human rights and the rule of law are core American values. The US and its allies will do well to recognize more firmly that Ethiopian aspirations for democracy are genuine and legitimate.

The United States Government, along with its allies, consistently display a politically weak reaction to the profound abrogation of Ethiopia's obligations under international law, not to mention its own constitution by turning a blind eye to the very repressive environment that exists in Ethiopia today. The United States Government should use its foreign aid to reward countries that govern themselves well and not use its foreign aid to prop up regimes like the regime in Ethiopia that has become the poster child for repression and brutality throughout Africa.

Furthermore, the United States Government should review its development aid policy towards Ethiopia so that aid can be used more effectively to advance the cause of human rights and respect for the rule of law along with other humanitarian considerations. Lack of sanction for human rights abuses encourages tyranny and will not help economic wellbeing in the long run. Only severe rebuke from and withdrawal of financial support by the United States Government and its allies will deter the Ethiopian government from its current trajectory.

It is also advisable for the United States Government, to press persistently and publicly for good and sustainable governance reforms in Ethiopia and work from the principles of mutually beneficial cooperation in a spirit of critical partnership.

It's understandable that the United States Government recognizes and respects the sovereignty of nation-states and seeks not to intervene unless its national security is at stake. However, where one is a donor entity (in fact the largest donor) to a government that continues to flaunt not only internationally recognized rights but also American standards, the United States Government is

compromising its stated mission and core values by aligning itself with and funding a brutal regime. Not giving your money to support repression is no intervention. Equally importantly, at least in this case, there is a large national security stake in the stability of Ethiopia, which can only come from meaningful and inclusive democratization.

A government that subjects its citizenry to its own brand of terrorism cannot be entrusted to safeguard the interests of the United States Government. The status quo in Ethiopia is intolerable and unacceptable. In a de facto one-party state like Ethiopia, where opposition parties have been systematically decimated, there is no one to represent the dreams, expectations and criticisms of the public. Loss of hope towards a peaceful transition to democracy is rapidly influencing people to consider alternative means of struggle.

With patience running out and frustration taking hold among the population, more and more political organizations are considering armed struggle (Ogaden National Liberation Front, Oromo Liberation Front, Tigray People's Democratic Movement, AFAR-Gadille, Gambella Nilotic Movement...etc.) as the only option to get rid of the brutal dictatorships. Recent disturbing reports from Agew Zone-Northern Ethiopia and from parts of Gambella and Afar indicate that ordinary peasants have started to arm themselves to challenge the government by force.

Ethiopia's heterogeneous society and the political elite are deeply divided. The inflexible political attitude and the monopolization of power in the hands of the current regime has left a majority of the population excluded from political participation or access to economic benefits. As a result, violent clashes are going to be more common in the near future leading to internal instability in the most populous country in East Africa. The Horn of Africa is of significant geostrategic value to U.S. interests and any type of instability in Ethiopia will have dire consequences for the entire region.

The current policy of cajoling the government to reform without in any way reducing the resources it receives from the West is not working. It is time for the United States Government and its allies to take a tough and principled stand against the excesses of the de facto one-party state in Ethiopia and use their financial leverage against the regime to persuade it to change before it is too late. I believe such a coordinated financial pressure by western allies will work to make the regime change its ways. Some of the needed reforms might take some time to implement, but the government's willingness to implement meaningful reforms

can be measured by a number of verifiable actions that it can take immediately. These include, for example:

- To rescind the repressive (CSO and Anti-Terrorism) laws, to stop the persecution of political dissidents subject to using trumped up terrorism charges to prevent the country from descending into political turmoil that will have dire consequences for the region and the Continent as a whole;
- To adhere to human rights principles in actions and not merely in words;
- To release all political prisoners, journalists and human rights defenders;
- To cease engaging in acts which violate internationally recognized human rights including: freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of assembly and political rights,
- To open up the political space as well as the government owned media so that Ethiopians will participate fully in the governance of their country; and
- To call for an open and constructive dialogue with all the opposition forces (both at home and abroad, armed and peaceful) in order to chart the country's future together.

I know, Mr. Chairman, under your leadership your committee and this House will do its part for the wellbeing of the people of Ethiopia.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. I stand ready to answer any questions you might have.