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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, members of the Subcommittee: thank you for holding this important hearing on the current situation in Ethiopia and for inviting me to testify. I am pleased to be a part of it.

Ethiopia is a country of dual realities. Visitors and diplomats alike are impressed with the double-digit economic growth, the progress on development indicators, and the apparent political stability. But in many ways, this is a smokescreen: many Ethiopians live in fear. The current government – the only one since 1991 – runs the country with an almost complete grip on power, controlling almost all aspects of political, public, and even much private life. Pervasive telephone and online surveillance and an intricate network of informants allow the government to quickly curb any threats to its control; it silences critical voices through the use of arbitrary arrests and politically motivated prosecutions. These actions also prevent critical and divergent views as many who may be impacted by these harsh policies fear repercussions.

Ethiopia remains among Africa's leading jailors of journalists. If you are or you seek to be an independent Ethiopian journalist you must choose between self-censorship, harassment, and possible arrest, or living in exile. The government blocks websites critical of the authorities and sometimes blocks the internet completely. Independent radio and television stations are regularly jammed. In short, the state tightly controls the media landscape, making it extremely challenging for Ethiopians to access information that is independent of government perspectives. As a result, Voice of America, which broadcasts in three Ethiopian languages, has become an increasingly important source of information for many Ethiopians but the government has, at times, obstructed its broadcasts as well.

Independent civil society groups face overwhelming obstructions. The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation has made obtaining foreign funding nearly impossible for groups working on human rights, good governance, and advocacy. Leading members of the human rights movement have been forced to flee abroad and many organizations have stopped working on human rights and good governance to avoid problems.

There have also been serious restrictions on opposition political parties. This led to the ruling coalition in the May 2015 election winning 100 percent of the seats in the federal and regional parliaments. This is despite evident anti-government sentiments in much of the country, as the protests would later illustrate. Arbitrary detention of members and supporters, politically motivated criminal charges, and restrictions on financing ensures that opposition parties are constrained and largely ineffective.

The state systematically ensures that many of the country's 100 million citizens are dependent on the government for their livelihoods, food security and economic future. It controls the benefits of development including access to seeds, fertilizers, jobs, health care, and humanitarian assistance, even when funded by the US or other donors. While US-funded development assistance contributes to much-needed poverty reduction efforts, it also adds to the repressive capacity of the government by bolstering Ethiopians' reliance on the government for their livelihoods and ultimately for their survival.

There is no evidence that the ruling party rigs elections – they don't need to. The population's dependence on the ruling party and the limits on opposition parties leaves many citizens, particularly in rural areas, little choice but to support the ruling party come election time. As one farmer in the Amhara region told me in July 2014, "we do not like this government, but we always vote for them. We have to because we get our seeds and fertilizer from them. During times of drought, we get food aid from them. If we don't vote for them, we can't eat." He went on to tell me about his neighbor who voted for the opposition in the 2010 election and shortly thereafter was denied food aid, was denied treatment at a government health clinic, and eventually was displaced from his land for an investment project run by a government cadre.

The justice system provides no check on the government. Courts have shown little independence during politically charged trials. Many opposition politicians, journalists, and activists have been convicted under the repressive 2009 anti-terrorism law and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Acquittals are rare, credible evidence is often not presented, and trials are marred by numerous due process concerns. Mistreatment and torture are common in Ethiopia's many places of detention. Just two weeks ago, Dr. Merera Gudina, the chair of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), a legally registered political opposition party, was charged with "outrages against the constitution." A former fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Merera joins many other senior opposition leaders currently facing politically motivated criminal charges. Among those presently standing trial is OFC deputy chairman Bekele Gerba. Prosecutors included as ostensible evidence of his crimes a video of Bekele at an August 2016 conference here in Washington, DC, where he spoke of the importance of nonviolence and commitment to the electoral process. Like Merera, he has been a moderate voice of dissent in a highly polarized political landscape.

This begs the question: what avenues are left in Ethiopia to express dissent, to question government policies or to voice concern over abusive practices and how can the United States help strengthen free expression and association rights in Ethiopia?

I speak to you today 16 months after large-scale and unprecedented protests started in Ethiopia's largest region of Oromia in November 2015, spreading to the Amhara region in July 2016. Ethiopian military forces and police cracked down on these largely peaceful demonstrations, killing hundreds and detaining tens of thousands. The protests were a predictable response to the systematic and calculated suppression of fundamental rights and freedoms.

On October 2, the protest movement took a devastating turn. In Bishoftu in Ethiopia's Oromia region, security forces mishandled a large crowd at the Irreecha cultural event causing a stampede that killed scores of people as they fled security forces. In the days that followed, angry mobs of youth destroyed government buildings and private property. Ethiopia was on the brink of chaos. One week after the Irreecha tragedy [five months ago today] the government announced a state of emergency that remains in place. It prescribed sweeping and vaguely worded restrictions on a broad range of actions undermining rights to free expression, association, and peaceful assembly. It goes far beyond what is permissible under international human rights law and signaled a continuation of the militarized response to the expression of grievances. While the state of emergency has halted both the destruction of properties and the

protests themselves, underlying grievances remain. No one should deny there are serious risks that more unrest could occur.

Since imposing the state of emergency, the Ethiopian government has repeatedly committed publicly to undertake “deep reform” and engage in dialogue with opposition parties to address grievances. In short, the authorities are saying the right things. But the only changes the government has made so far are largely cosmetic and fall dramatically short of the protesters’ calls for the protection of basic human rights.

The continuation of the state of emergency – furthering crushing the space for free expression and divergent views of governance – is not conducive for the open dialogue that is needed to address Ethiopia’s ongoing crisis. The government announced that it arrested over 20,000 people since the state of emergency began, although there has been little corroboration of these numbers, which could be higher. These mass arrests along with politically motivated trials of key opposition leaders, reinforces the message that the government is continuing along the path of suppressing dissent by force and not engaging in genuine and meaningful dialogue with opposition groups.

The Ethiopian government’s responses to all of these abuses have been consistent. The allegations are routinely denied without meaningful investigation, the government claiming they are politically motivated, while simultaneously restricting access for independent media and human rights investigators. In a report to parliament last June, the Ethiopia Human Rights Commission, a government body, concluded that the level of force used by federal security forces was proportionate to the risk they faced from protesters. This is contrary to all available evidence, including that contained in the US State Department’s recently released Human Rights Country Report for Ethiopia. No one has seen a written version of the Commission’s report that would justify such a conclusion.

While we are speaking today about the lack of accountability over the brutal crackdown in Oromia and Amhara regions over the last 16 months, Ethiopians in other regions have also been victims of serious abuses, most often without any meaningful investigations by the government. For example, Human Rights Watch documented possible crimes against humanity committed by the Ethiopian army in 2003 and 2004 in the Gambella region. There was no credible investigation into the extrajudicial executions, rape, and torture. In Ethiopia’s Somali Regional state, the Ethiopian military committed war crimes and possibly crimes against humanity between mid-2007 and 2008 during their counterinsurgency campaign against the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). The Liyu police, a paramilitary force formed in 2008 who report to the president of the Somali Regional state, have been implicated in numerous extrajudicial killings, torture, rape, and attacks on civilians accused of backing the ONLF. No meaningful investigations have been undertaken into any of these alleged abuses in the Somali Regional state.

International scrutiny of Ethiopia’s rights record has also been lacking despite its June election to the UN Security Council, and its membership on the UN Human Rights Council – which requires it to uphold the “highest standards of human rights” and cooperate with UN monitors. Ethiopia has refused entry to all UN special rapporteurs since 2007, except the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea. There are outstanding requests from the special rapporteurs on torture,

freedom of opinion and expression, and peaceful assembly, among others. In total, 11 UN Special Rapporteurs have outstanding requests for access to Ethiopia.

Despite abundant evidence of serious and growing repression by the Ethiopian government, particularly since the 2005 election, the US government has been a muted critic. Quiet diplomacy proven ineffectual and has coincided with the dramatic downward spiral in human rights and a serious constriction of political space that has led to the crisis Ethiopia is in today. It is time for a new US approach to Ethiopia in which Congress can play a leadership role in seeking a more balanced policy and requiring more deliberate oversight as it has done in other countries in crisis, including the Democratic Republic of Congo and Egypt.

As a starting point, members of Congress should speak out strongly and publicly against abuses by the Ethiopian government. House Resolution 128 and the resolutions introduced last year are steps in the right direction and contain many important elements. While non-binding, they are impactful because they let the Ethiopian government know there are repercussions for brutality against their own citizens – brutality that undermines US priorities in the Horn of Africa, including security, development, and economic growth. These partnerships are dependent on long-term stability in Ethiopia. Opposition to the ruling party's repressive rule – as witnessed in the last 16 months – is a glaring indication that Ethiopia's governance model marked by lack of respect for basic rights, is incapable of ensuring that stability.

International legitimacy is very important to the Ethiopian government – it wants to be a key player on the international stage and condemnation of its human rights record contradicts that image. So, consistent, sustained and vocal pressure is critical.

It is crucial that the US makes it clear that if Ethiopia is going to remain a strong US partner it needs to open up legitimate political space and allow for critical voices to be heard. To begin with, members of Congress can and should call for the release of all political prisoners, including those like Bekele and Merera who should be part of any credible dialogue between the government and opposition parties. Members of Congress should also call for the release of all journalists unjustly jailed and call for the repeal or substantial amendment of repressive laws used to stifle critical voices. Any meetings with the Ethiopian ambassador to the US should include these points, as should any meetings with other Ethiopian officials, whether in DC or elsewhere. As the FY18 budget process gets underway, US support to the Ethiopian government should be conditioned on making progress in these and other areas of concern.

Members of Congress should use available opportunities to tell Ethiopia to stop hiding its own human rights record from international scrutiny. As a member of both the Human Rights Council and the Security Council, Ethiopia should cooperate fully with UN special mechanisms, in particular the rapporteurs on peaceful assembly and torture.

As expressed in House Resolution 128, members of Congress should reiterate the call of the UN high commissioner for human rights, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, and others for an independent international investigation into the crackdown in Oromia and Amhara regions. Such action will send a powerful message to the Ethiopian government that its

security forces cannot shoot and kill peaceful protesters with impunity. It will also send an important message to the victims and families, [including those here in this room] that their pleas for justice are being heard.

I'll close by saying that I am aware of concerns expressed by some in the administration – and even here in Congress – that a more public stance on Ethiopia's domestic situation might undermine the bilateral partnership between Addis Ababa and Washington – including cooperation on development, security and peacekeeping. But the United States has often underestimated its own leverage and been overly cautious as a result. Some of Ethiopia's international partners have made strong public statements in the last year and these statements have not undermined their strategic partnerships. Far from it. The US may need Ethiopia – but Ethiopia needs the US too. The US should send a strong signal of support to the many Ethiopian citizens and Ethiopian Americans who seek the protection of their rights, greater political space, and democracy but whose fight for dignity and freedom has been crushed time and again through brutal force.

Thank you.