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Organization
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“Democracy under Threat in Ethiopia”

*All points stated in my testimony are documented or can be validated by State Department report that came out on Friday March 3rd, 2017 and by HRW, AI, FR and other independent publication

Good afternoon!

Chairman Smith, Ranking Members Bass, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you very much for this opportunity. I must say my presence here is historical and I am beyond honored for the opportunity to speak before you here.

With the understanding of the countless suffering of Ethiopians like the Amhara, today, I am specifically here to speak about three generations of pain, agony and political oppression against the Oromo people. My grandfather's saw massacres, my father and uncles served in prison camps as do my younger brothers and sisters today. This is not just the story of my family, rather the story of many Oromos who constitute over 40% of Ethiopian population and occupy the most productive lands. Oromia is the backbone of the Ethiopian economy, home for the country's key export items: Coffee, gold, other precious minerals. Despite its huge demography and huge contributions to the national economy, the Oromo are politically and socially marginalized in Ethiopia. Oromia is supposedly a self-governing state, but in reality, it does not enjoy any more autonomy than as province under previous Ethiopian administrations. Culturally, the Oromo language, one of the country's most spoken, is relegated to a provincial status. For example, while the capital is situated at the heart Oromia, the Oromo could not receive services there in their mother tongue. To make matters worse, not even simple translation services are available for them, which is why people resisted, in the face of widespread human rights violations, being incorporated into the capital through the botched Addis Ababa integrated master plan.

The human rights violations I talk about are of individuals I know personally, who got killed, mutilated, tortured and still languish in prison. Their crime is for only being Oromo and outspoken.

I must also acknowledge that while hundreds better qualified than I can be here today, I bring a unique voice. First of all, I am a woman, the primary victims of human rights violations you often never hear about. Secondly, I am women's rights advocate for voiceless within voiceless. Thirdly, I am a follower of Wakefanna, the much less talked about indigenous Oromo religion. Fourth, I represent a generation that knows, understands and lived in both countries (my birthplace and America, land of opportunity), from a place where religion is imposed to a country where religious diversity is celebrated. As an African in America, I am an eyewitness to the harms of religion extremism and sexism.

To speak the truth, I highly doubt my own people, for whom I am fighting day and night, will value me equal to my brother who cares less about them. It is with this understanding that I not only value the American interest in the region but believe it is necessary that the American mission in my region succeed because it gives voice to voiceless woman like me. Therefore, I want to assure this House that American interest is my interest, the interest of many Oromos.

26 years ago, in June 1991, Ass Sec of State of Hermann Cohen testified in front of House Foreign Affairs. He said, “No democracy no support.” For 26 years Ethiopia has become an open prison for so many Ethiopians, particularly Oromos who make the overwhelming majority of the prison population. Today, 26 years later people are afraid to speak and exercise basic rights guaranteed by the constitution. Under the codename of “State of Emergency” a husband watches his wife and daughters get raped, sons taken away or killed. Even though I myself have lived under terror and being watched and beaten by this government, what is new is the use of this new term State of Emergency, which allowed it to shut off the small means of communication between my people and the outside world. In Ethiopia all independent media, including VOA, is greatly curtailed, journalists jailed, opposition party leaders charged with terrorism, social media punishable by up to five years in jail, all rights organization banned and request by UNHRHC for independent investigation denied and US concern statements ignored.

In fact, opposition party leaders are arrested for speaking to EU leaders and human rights organizations. In a single year from Nov 2015-2016, over 1000 Oromos were killed. Using the emergency law, the regime forces citizens to feed armies patrolling the street, literally paying to keep its killers alive. Even though it seems like lots has happened to the world, for us, Oromos abuse by the state has always been part of our upbringing, the fiber that made who we are. What made 2016 special to us is not the amount of lives lost rather the fact the world has finally come to know and see the true color of this government, and the suffering of the Oromo people.

#OromoProtests erupted in Nov 2015 in response to what is known as Addis Ababa Master plan which sought to expand the capital into the Oromia region displacing millions of farmers, curving Oromia into two regions, changing the livelihood of 36 Oromia towns and 17 districts. When we think of Ethiopia's capital city, we must remember Addis Ababa sits at heart of Oromia, and an integral part of Oromia. Thus, the change would have meant for those displaced being forced to speak a new language, play by new culture, live under a new administration and these Oromos could no longer call themselves and be who they really are, Oromo. What is more is also that for Oromos the issue of land is tied to how they see themselves and how they worship their gods. All these happened without consulting residents. It was then that primary and secondary school students took to the streets after watching their neighbors and families' lands being sold to investors to grow flowers, cotton and seeing their siblings becoming beggars, porters and lowly-paid security guards. A land they once called home and a neighborhood they once saw as part of who they are becoming more and more alien to them and they becoming foreigners on their ancestral land.

On the other hand, although as early as January 2016 the Ethiopian government admitted to use of excessive force, no single individual has as of yet been brought to justice. Six month after its

admission, in June HRW release a 61 page document detailing interviews with hundreds of people who survived gruesome and inhuman acts by the security forces. As protests continued the government continued giving lip services to the western government by admitting that there were indeed serious issues of lack of good governance and that they will open talks with opposition parties. However, now two years later nothing has changed except the implementation of a brutal system of killing and silencing innocent people under the cover of martial law.

Moreover, torture never ends for Oromos even when they flee Ethiopia. It follows them wherever they go in the region. Tired of the deafening silence from the international community, having watched their fellow brothers and sisters being taken back to Ethiopia one by one, and facing discrimination and harassment from governments of neighboring countries, on July 28, 2016 two Oromo refugees set themselves on fire in front of Cairo's United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office in the hope of bringing attention to their dismal plight. As a proud partner to the US war on terrorism, the Ethiopian government can go to Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and even as far as Saudi Arabia to bring back those that it considered threats to its hold on power. As if this was not enough, on September 3 the notorious Qilinto prison was set on fire killing 23 prisoners by government's own admission but hundreds more are still missing nearly 8 month later. What is more, even though many see this as a failed attempt to kill high profile prisoners like BekeleGerba, the government is now turning around and charging them for starting the fire.

Among the most horrific acts of crime by this government, the October 2 Irrecha massacre stands as the darkest day in modern history for the Oromo where hundreds were killed though the government puts the causality at 53. I must also note that while Oromos and the Oromia region was under the current form of military control for over a year, the official declaration of the state of emergency, code name for cover up came only in October 2016 and the only intent was to use it as an excuse to cut off the little information people received from abroad. We all know that the declaration of state of emergency bring law and order but rather to make sure no foreign media will cover heinous crimes being committed and to silence dissent.

Mr. Chairman, we know in no democratic country, let alone in Ethiopia, can a ruling party win an election by 100%. The "victory" of Ethiopian's 2015 election, is achieved by using the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation to lock up opposition leaders as terrorists, intimidate their supporters, and rig the election when all else fails. Sadly, the US government, my government, is looking the other way.

In the name of standing with allies, we should not be enabling tyrants to oppress their people, disregard the rule of law, and trample upon basic human freedoms. At this age of international turbulence, America cannot afford to send the wrong message to foreign leaders. The US has a moral obligation as the greatest nation on earth, as the beacon of hope for liberty and as a shining light many looks up to.

Moreover, we must know a blind support of this government can only extend what is inevitable. The death of thousands of Oromos and other Ethiopians cannot bring a lasting solution to the country's mounting problems. In fact, Ethiopia's growing domestic troubles are slowly but surely limiting the country's ability to play a constructive regional role. One of the

main reason why Ethiopia was given \$864 million in 2014 and far more in 2016 was for her role in the Somalia and Sudan peacekeeping missions. As of 2017, Ethiopia's effectiveness in these roles has greatly diminished with growing domestic troubles, be it the protests, the insurrections and the looming famine, with larger and larger numbers of troop withdrawing, with large gains by Al-Shabaab, and with the election of the new Somali president handily defeating his Ethiopia-backed rival. Recent US rapprochement with Kenya and Egypt and its decision to open talks with Eritrea speak to Ethiopia's diminishing regional role.

While I understand the need for strong, reliable and dependable partners in a volatile region too close to extremism, reliance on a minority-dominated government hailing from a mere 6% of a population 100 million strong cannot be sustainable and would rather endanger American interests. For now, under the draconian state of Emergency, Ethiopia may seem calm and the government may say they have brought back law and order but that should not fool us because we know the truth. Ethiopia is a country of 100 million people inhabited by 82 different ethnic groups. Such a diverse state could not survive under a fake federalism, as former Ass Sec of State for African Affairs, Cohen said in 2016, where a minority clique clings to power through a divide and rule strategy. Some want to say as if there is no alternative to the ruling party. The alternative is not between an oppressive system and the unknown or chaos. The US has clear alternatives in Ethiopia. True democracy is the only lasting solution. I don't think we should give into the unfounded fear of seeing that country disintegrate because the people have lived side by side for centuries. In fact, if there is a true democracy I don't doubt the people will choose to live appear with their neighbors, family members which are intermixed with and lived happily side by side for generations. Love happens, it need not be forced. Oromos are one of the most peace-loving people that I have heard of, not because I said it but history show us. Time and again, Oromia has protected everyone that lives within her borders creating a safe-haven to everyone, including Tigreans at a time when they were brutally murdered by 1000s during the previous dictatorial regime.

Mr. Chairman, if what we seek is a united democratic nation where all people have equal opportunity as human beings, we must ask for accountability and push for real and tangible action. The United States government and Congress must ask for an immediate release of all political prisoners, journalists, dissidents, the lifting of the State of Emergency and the restoration of peace in border areas by stopping attacks by the Liyu Police with the backing federal army. Certainly, the introduction of H. Res 128 is a great start. While I thank the leadership behind it and all those who co-sponsored it, I ask you and beg you to reach out to your colleagues to co-sponsor and ask all those caring about Ethiopia to speak up before it is too late. The window of opportunity closes with each passing day, with each passing lives murdered at the hands of this government either at the border by Liyu police, at homes or refugee camps.

Clearly Ethiopia is in a serious not only from rising human violations but also the never-ending requests for foreign aid to feed the millions starving Year after Year. We must ask ourselves, how long are we or should we keep financing a regime that got 30 billion in foreign since it came to power in 1991 and stole 30 billion according to (Steinman, 2017). The current government has been given more than enough opportunity and resource to uplift its people from poverty and transition to democracy. We must say enough and save Ethiopia before it is too late.

My generation, the Oromo people and many other Ethiopians look up to American democracy as a beacon of hope. We cannot ignore the young generation. The youth, who makes up 50% of the entire population, aspires for democracy, peace and security. We must not leave Ethiopia's fate to the current government. We cannot leave it up to the current government to investigate into its own gross human rights violations documented by the United State government. It is time to work on alternatives. Ethiopia's ruling party does not represent the country's future but its past.

In fact, I think we have a brand-new opportunity with a new administration. Let the oppressive region know that American resources and support comes with accountability. A regime that kills its own people cannot bring peace in neighboring countries.

For me, I have young girls in middle school that I support in rural part of Oromia. They look up to me as their role model. They see me as the American girl but one of them to which they can relate. If they can see me make it this far, they know it is a matter of time for them to go further. With the rise of religion extremism, my presence as a secular voice is the most powerful message that women like me can give. Those girls mean the whole world to me. But today, because of what I said here this afternoon, I am putting them and my family members left in Oromia in great danger. I chose to testify because this is not history but rather a testimony on my own personal experience for which I am ready to accept all sacrifices.

Thank you again for your tireless efforts to stop human rights violations in Ethiopia and for your commitment to promoting democracy, peace, justice and rule of law.