

**Testimony of Deacon Yoseph R. Tafari before the House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global  
Human Rights, and International Organizations**

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**Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the situation in Ethiopia**

I would like to open my testimony first by thanking our representative of the 6<sup>th</sup> district of Colorado, the honorable Mike Coffman for his unyielding supportive voice for the Ethiopian people and our diverse Community in the state. I also would like to recognize the passionate advocacy of my Ethiopian brothers and sisters from the Oromo community, especially Mr. Hassen Ararso and Mr. Jamal Said

Please allow me to introduce myself to make relevance of my presence before you. My Name is Deacon Yoseph Tafari, co-founder of the Ethiopian Drought Relief of Colorado. I am an ordained deacon serving under the Archdiocese of the exiled Ethiopian Orthodox Holy Synod. I am an entrepreneurial business man operating a commercial printing company in Colorado.

I grew up in Ethiopia where my deep love and appreciation of for the country and its people has forever shaped to who I am today. At a very young age I was exposed to the daily struggle of my people caused by abject poverty many faced all around me. For a brief period I volunteered with Oxfam relief campaign in a remote village in Wollo province which was devastated by a dreadful famine that took place during 1971-1974. During the campaign I witnessed unspeakable suffering of children dying a slow agonizing death due to lack of food and water all while those in a position of power remain indifferent to the unfolding plight. This dichotomy subsequently lead me to join student protest which coincided with the overthrow of Emperor Haileselasie's government by military junta known as "The Derg". The new order was much more menacing and swift especially during the time known as the "The Red Terror" that took the lives of many young Ethiopians including my own 14 year old brother. In 1976 I was forced to flee Ethiopia and seek refugee in the neighboring Sudan in order to save my own life. Fortunately, I was allowed to enter United States as a refuge, which paved the way to a life changing journey. Since then Ethiopia has not fared well in most measures, especially since the current TPLF (Tigrai People Liberation Front) regime took the central political power in 1991, Ethiopia has gone from bad to worse.

This backdrop of my own journey to America a country that provided me and my family the opportunity to be free and share its dreams, is in some way allowed my own objective commentary regarding the present day danger facing Ethiopia.

Please allow me to provide some of the major aspect of Ethiopia's profile:

## **Religious Freedom**

Ethiopia a nation which has been referenced in the book of Genesis through the manuscript of the New Testament is a country with 3,000 years of written history that has never been colonized by foreign power. One of its enduring virtues is its multi century tradition of the coexistence of people with various Semitic faiths which exists to the present day of Ethiopia. By and large, The Ethiopian Christians, Muslims and Jews together have long been recognized the individual right to worship free from persecution as the only way for national cohesiveness. Throughout its history, evidence of common inter-religious marriages, co-observation of sacred holidays, social assimilation, mutual dependence for trade and even the gallant sacrifices shared to defend the freedom of the country is a rare find anywhere. It is a unique model in play considering the approximation of the very region to where these semitic religions originated from, and thus remains the great wonder of Ethiopia's history. This virtue is in our DNA passed on from our fathers, and it is truly Ethiopia's greatest gift to the world.

Therefore, in the fight against extremism and global terrorism one can never find a better natural ally than the people of Ethiopia who for centuries have possessed the wisdom and ingredients for peaceful coexistence amongst people of different religion. This collective asset will undoubtedly contribute far more lasting regional stability provided it is represented by a democratic political structure. Instead, Ethiopia is ruled by a minority Ethnic regime which has brought about highly destructive governance by perpetually marginalizing and terrorizing other ethnic and religious groups by pitting one against the other which may yield a damaging consequence to the nation's unique virtues and ultimately the fight against extremism and global terrorism.

## **Ethnic Identity**

From the early days of its foundation, TPLF goals has been well documented. It is to breakup over the Ethiopian population by Ethnic identity while simultaneously control all the nation's resource for the benefit of a single ethnic minority group. All actions in every layer of civic duties, legislation, public policy, economic planning as well as national security is shaped by this singular mission. Today Ethiopia is strained to a breaking point due to excessive marginalization of the majority ethnic Ethiopians in the last 25 years. Desperate for their lives, hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians are fleeing the country making it one of the World's top refugee producing nation.

Oromia and Amhara are the two biggest ethnic groups, together comprising around 65% of the population. Since taking power, the regime embarked on a national campaign to insight conflict between these two significant ethnic groups to no avail. Ethiopia is a mosaic of nationalities, but yet this ethnic regime has been waging war

consistently against the Afar, the Anuak, The Ogden Somali's, The Gambella, The Benishangul people as well as countless minority ethnic groups. When the clear majority of Ethiopians finally said enough, massive protests were sparked across the country. In particular, a joint declaration of unity between the Oromia and the Amhara ethnic groups, have resulted in the regime declaring an Emergency decree on the entire nation. Unlike its predecessor, the TPLF is a silent killer utilizing covert methods including assassins, sniper sharp shooters, poisoning, and numerous inhuman methods against its own people. The Emergency decree is an added blanket tool in its lethal arsenal to efficiently execute its barbaric measures against humanity.

Much ink has been spelled in documenting the crimes of the TPLF regime against the Ethiopian people. In short Ethiopia is a country with no opposition, judicial system, civil society, independent media or political space. Instead the country has turned into closed killing chambers and the prisons and detention centers are packed with thousands of political prisoners while the world is looking the other way.

### **Ethiopia's aspiration for Genuine Democracy and the reality of Ethnic Dictatorship**

To point a few highlights in order to frame today's discussion:

1. Religious Freedom: The expulsion of the Orthodox Holy Synod from Ethiopia for the first time since its establishment in the 4<sup>th</sup> century as well as the imprisonment of Sheik Ahmedin Jebel the Ethiopian Muslims faith leader have made the country to make moral challenge virtually impossible to the ruling party's brutal measures.
2. Political Party: Systematic suppression of independent political parties especially after its resounding defeat by the opposition parties including by Dr. Berhanu Nega and Engineer Hailu Shawel and other political parties in the 2005 national election. Since then, the regime has devised the most perfect rigging mechanism on the entire election process, resulting in "Perfect vote score" of 100% electoral margin in the subsequent national elections of 2010 and 2015 with no independent international election observers to validate the "election" process.
3. Independent Media: Ethiopia has virtually no independent media within its borders and international broadcasters' signals are regularly jammed. Even social media and online blogs are monitored, restricted and censored. Those who dare to report their grievances are charged with terrorism and put in prison for years. According to the Washington Post (February 11, 2014), the TPLF has even gone far enough to hire a notorious spyware vendor with spying tools in an attempt to eavesdrop on exiled Ethiopian journalists in the United States. Today Ethiopia is the second-highest number of jailed journalists in sub-Saharan Africa. According to CPJ 2017 report Ethiopia has just reached 259 journalists jailed, worst year on record.

4. **Independent Judicial Branch**: The legislative and judicial bodies in Ethiopia is totally controlled by the regime as a convenient “Legalizing Platform”, an effective tool for the executive branch to rule the country at will.
5. **The Military**: Ethiopia has no national army. The entire military apparatus is a direct extension of the ruling party, and over 95% of its generals are Ethnic Tigray to ensure unwavering loyalty to the minority regime. Instead of safeguarding the national security interest, the Ethiopian military’s allegiance has been to the Tigrai People Liberation Front.
6. **Economy**: Highly centralized where by the largest source of gainful employment source in the country is the government itself. In order to self-serve the ruling party, it is used as exclusive weapon for nationwide mechanism to reward its supporters and punish its potential foes. According to Ethiopian Broadcasting Corp report, a large number of the population’s sole income is remittance from family and friends in the diaspora. In 2015 alone remittances to Ethiopians from abroad was \$3.7 billion. Despite claim of growth and prosperity, Ethiopia still remains the 8<sup>th</sup> world’s poorest nation where nearly 20 percent of the population is facing endless chronic famine.
7. **Foreign Aid**: According to Forbes (2017) report, the amount of American financial aid received by Ethiopia’s government since it took power is \$30 billion. It is such foreign aid without condition that has empowered the regime’s oppressive infrastructure against the Ethiopian people.
8. **Illicit Financial Flows**: According to Commissioned by the AU/ECA Conference of Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, since the current ruling party came to power, \$30 billion has been illicitly taken out of Ethiopia.
9. **Corruption**: According to Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index Ethiopia ranks 108 out of 168 countries as the most corrupt state in the world, thereby impeding democracy and the rule of law in the country. In an undemocratic system like Ethiopia, public institutions and offices do not have any fear when they misuse their power for private interest. Today, bribery, cronyism and nepotism is the bedrock economic foundation of Ethnic Dictatorship in Ethiopia, where the demarcation line between public and private has long disappeared.
10. **Famine**: Ethiopia is facing another famine for which the regime have asked \$946 million for immediate assistance while it hired U.S based firm, S.G.R LLC lobbying at a cost of US \$1.8 million a year. Humanitarian assistance transcends all condition to provide lifesaving effort. However, funds should never directly be given to a corrupt dictators without any accountability.

Since the El Nino's global weather pattern alone cannot adequately explain Ethiopian famine reoccurrence, we need to closely examine the failure of the political system itself. Nobel Prize winner and economist Amartya Sen has extensively analyzed the relationship between democracy and famine in his book "Development as Freedom". Sen argues,

*"Democracies don't have famines, only authoritarian systems do. Famine tend to happen in places where the victims are oppressed by dictators. A historical investigation of famine also identified 30 major famines during the 20th century. All happened in countries led by autocratic rule or that were under armed conflict, four being in Ethiopia. Why does autocracy lead to famine? The most fundamental reason is that autocrats often don't care enough about the population to prevent famine. Autocrats maintain power through force, not popular approval. This argument has been proven true in the case of Ethiopia."* Sadly, a fraction of the \$30 billion illicitly flowed out of Ethiopia would have mitigated the current famine relief requested by the regime..

11. Human Trafficking: As a result of the continued crises, Ethiopia has become one of the highest sources of human trafficking in the world. Many young Ethiopians flee by foot or sea attempting to reach the Middle East or Europe, where many die in transit from inhuman conditions or become exploited by human traffickers. According to the U.S Department of State's "Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons", up to 1,500 Ethiopians depart daily in search of better opportunities. Many Ethiopian women working in domestic service in the Middle East endure severe abuse, including physical and sexual assault, denial of salary, sleep deprivation, passport confiscation, and confinement. Ethiopian women who migrate for work or after fleeing abusive employers in the Middle East are also vulnerable to sex trafficking. Ethiopian men and boys migrate to the Gulf States and other African nations, where some are subjected to forced labor, a modern version of slavery. Saudi Arabia remains the primary destination for irregular migrants; reportedly, over 400,000 Ethiopians reside there, including some trafficking victims. Previous reports suggest district-level officials accepted bribes to alter ages on identification cards, allowing children to acquire passports without parental consent and enabling minors to leave the country for work. Ethiopian girls as young as 8 years old are exploited in prostitution or domestic servitude.
12. State of Emergency: The European Parliament (2016) report indicated that Ethiopia has declared a six-month state of emergency in light of the deadly protests that have rocked the country in the past few months. These protests stem from the grievances of Ethiopians of various ethnicities that have been subject to a system of governance whereby the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) controls all key levers of economic and political power. Key political institutions are owned and operated by, and for the benefit of, the ruling ethnic group.

## **"The Fierce Urgency Of Now" for Ethiopia**

1. Immediate halt of direct foreign aid to the Ethiopian government. All essential humanitarian aid should be redirected to international agencies on the ground.
2. The lifting of the State of Emergency
3. Immediate cessation of killing, torture and imprisonment
4. The immediate release all political prisoners without any precondition including:
  - Mr. Eskinder Nega
  - Dr. Merera Gudina
  - Col. Demeke Zewdu
  - Professor Bekele Gerba
  - Mr. Ahmedin Jebel
  - Mr. Andualem Aragie
  - Mr. Andargatchew Tsegie
5. Allow independent investigations of the violence by a team of UN Human Rights Council and hold those responsible fully accountable.
6. Demand the presence of independent and international media in Ethiopia

## **Summary Conclusion**

Ethiopia has been gripped by Apartheid like system of governance affecting 100 million of its citizens. The regime has repeatedly showed the world that it operates much as an underground criminal enterprise than ruling body with mandate to govern an ancient country like Ethiopia. All its activity and sheer existence is for monetary gain from the nation which has made few individuals of the inner circle fabulously wealthy. To these individuals Ethiopia is for sale and the asset of the nation is to be monetized in every turn. By providing material assistance it receives under the pretext of "ally against terror" the regime should never be given the license to terrorize its own people. In short the regime is not an ally in the war against global terrorism; instead it is the most destabilizing political force in the entire Horn of Africa. The United States need to take into account that dictatorship based on the sole interest of minority ethnic group can be the most ruthless force as the world is just witnessing the humanitarian crisis unfolding in present day Syria. The primordial fear of retribution becomes a self-fulfilling cycle of suppression and Human right violation by minority ethnic dictatorship.

Last, we can find example within the same continent a much better political solution in which the US played a major role in bringing to historical outcome. This fine example is non other than the end of Apartheid system in South Africa. In both instances the culprit for the suffering of the people of Ethiopia and South Africa is MINORITY RULING DICTATORSHIP. Intrinsic to its core belief such system can only function by forceful suppression of the will of the majority. As a result, both TPLF of Ethiopia and The Apartheid System of South Africa are the perfect example of unsustainable political status quo. As in the case of South Africa the gallant struggle of the majority combined with world economic embargo forced the dictatorship to come to the table for peaceful

transition thereby creating a more perfect union. In my opinion that is “The Fierce Urgency Of Now” for Ethiopia today.

I call upon the United States of America, the beacon of Hope and Democracy to reexamine its failed policy towards Ethiopia and to seek a lasting framework of dialog, transition for true democratic governance where all the stakeholder can fully participate in determining Ethiopia’s future. Until the TPLF regime agrees in lifting the State of Emergency and come to the table with verifiable steps for transitional reform, I ask the US to stop funding and providing military assistance to the regime. I urge this measure so that the window for dialogue and peaceful transfer can build the permanent barrier for the country from cascading into becoming the Syria of Africa.

Thank you and look forward for your questions.

May God Bless the United States of America!  
May God Bless Ethiopia, Amen

.Deacon Yoseph R Tafari