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World Report 2013 - Ethiopia

The sudden death in August 2012 of Ethiopia's long-serving and powerful prime minister, Meles Zenawi, provoked uncertainty over the country's political transition, both domestically and among Ethiopia's international partners. Ethiopia's human rights record has sharply deteriorated, especially over the past few years, and although a new prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, took office in September, it remains to be seen whether the government under his leadership will undertake human rights reforms.

Ethiopian authorities continued to severely restrict basic rights of freedom of expression, association, and assembly in 2012. Thirty journalists and opposition members were convicted under the country's vague Anti-Terrorism Proclamation of 2009. The security forces responded to protests by the Muslim community in Oromia and Addis Ababa, the capital, with arbitrary arrests, detentions, and beatings.

The Ethiopian government continues to implement its "villagization" program: the resettlement of 1.5 million rural villagers in five regions of Ethiopia ostensibly to increase their access to basic services. Many villagers in Gambella region have been forcibly displaced, causing considerable hardship. The government is also forcibly displacing indigenous pastoral communities in Ethiopia's Lower Omo Valley to make way for state-run sugar plantations.

Freedom of Expression, Association, and Assembly

Since the promulgation in 2009 of the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO Law), which regulates nongovernmental organizations, and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, freedom of expression, assembly, and association have been increasingly restricted in Ethiopia. The effect of these two laws, coupled with the government's widespread and persistent harassment, threats, and intimidation of civil society activists, journalists, and others who comment on sensitive issues or express views critical of government policy, has been severe.

Ethiopia's most important human rights groups have been compelled to dramatically scale-down operations or remove human rights activities from their mandates, and an unknown number of organizations have closed entirely. Several of the country's most experienced and reputable human rights activists have fled the country due to threats. The environment is equally hostile for independent media: more journalists have fled Ethiopia than any other country in the world due to threats and intimidation in the last decade—at least 79, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

The Anti-Terrorism Proclamation is being used to target perceived opponents, stifle dissent, and silence journalists. In 2012, 30 political activists, opposition party members, and journalists were convicted on vaguely defined terrorism offenses. Eleven journalists have been convicted under the law since 2011.

On January 26, a court in Addis Ababa sentenced both deputy editor Woubshet Taye and columnist Reeyot Alemu of the now-defunct weekly *Awramaba Times* to 14 years in prison. Reeyot's sentence was later reduced to five years upon appeal and most of the charges were dropped.

On July 13, veteran journalist and blogger Eskinder Nega, who won the prestigious PEN America Freedom to Write Award in April, was sentenced to 18 years in prison along with other journalists, opposition party members, and political activists. Exiled journalists Abiye Teklemariam and Mesfin Negash were sentenced to eight years each in absentia under a provision of the Anti-Terrorism Law that has so far only been used against journalists. Andualem Arage, a member of the registered opposition party Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ), was sentenced to life for espionage, "disrupting the constitutional order," and recruitment and training to commit terrorist acts.

In September, the Ethiopian Federal High Court ordered the property of Eskinder Nega, exiled journalist Abebe Belew, and opposition member Andualem Arage to be confiscated.

On July 20, after the government claimed that reports by the newspaper *Feteh* on Muslim protests and the prime minister's health would endanger national security, it seized the entire print run of the paper. On August 24, *Feteh*'s editor, Temesghen Desalegn was arrested and denied bail. He was released on August 28, and all the charges were withdrawn pending further investigation.

Police on July 20 raided the home of journalist Yesuf Getachew, editor-in-chief of the popular Muslim magazine *Yemuslimoche Guday* (Muslim Affairs), and arrested him that night. The magazine has not been published since, and at this writing, Yesuf remained in detention.

On December 27, 2011, two Swedish journalists, Martin Schibbye and Johan Persson, were found guilty of supporting a terrorist organization after being arrested while traveling in eastern Ethiopia with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), an outlawed armed insurgent group. They were also convicted of entering the country illegally. The court sentenced them to 11 years in prison. On September 10, they were pardoned and released along with more than 1,950 other prisoners as part of Ethiopia's annual tradition of amnesty to celebrate the Ethiopian New Year.

On several occasions in July, federal police used excessive force, including beatings, to disperse largely Muslim protesters opposing the government's interference with the country's Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs. On July 13, police forcibly entered the Awalia mosque in Addis Ababa, smashing windows and firing tear gas inside the mosque. On July 21, they forcibly broke up a sit-in at the mosque. From July 19 to 21, dozens of people were rounded up and 17 prominent leaders were held without charge for over a week. Many of the detainees complained of mistreatment in detention.

Forced Displacement

The Ethiopian government plans to relocate up to 1.5 million people under its "villagization" program, purportedly designed to improve access to basic services by moving people to new villages in Ethiopia's five lowland regions: Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), and Somali Region.

In Gambella and in the South Omo Valley, forced displacement is taking place without adequate consultation and compensation. In Gambella, Human Rights Watch found that relocations were

often forced and that villagers were being moved from fertile to infertile areas. People sent to the new villages frequently have to clear the land and build their own huts under military supervision, while the promised services (schools, clinics, water pumps) often have not been put in place.

In South Omo, around 200,000 indigenous peoples are being relocated and their land expropriated to make way for state-run sugar plantations. Residents reported being moved by force, seeing their grazing lands flooded or ploughed up, and their access to the Omo River, essential for their survival and way of life, curtailed.

Extrajudicial Executions, Torture and other Abuses in Detention

An Ethiopian government-backed paramilitary force known as the “Liyu Police” executed at least 10 men who were in their custody and killed 9 other villagers in Ethiopia’s Somali Region on March 16 and 17 following a confrontation over an incident in Raqda village, Gashaamo district.

In April, unknown gunmen attacked a commercial farm owned by the Saudi Star company in Gambella that was close to areas that had suffered a high proportion of abuses during the villagization process. In responding to the attack, Ethiopian soldiers went house to house looking for suspected perpetrators and threatening villagers to disclose the whereabouts of the “rebels.” The military arbitrarily arrested many young men and committed torture, rape, and other abuses against scores of villagers while attempting to extract information.

Human Rights Watch continues to document torture at the federal police investigation center known as Maekelawi in Addis Ababa, as well as at regional detention centers and military barracks in Somali Region, Oromia, and Gambella. There is erratic access to legal counsel and insufficient respect for other due process guarantees during detention, pre-trial detention, and trial phases of politically sensitive cases, placing detainees at risk of abuse.

Treatment of Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers

The videotaped beating and subsequent suicide on March 14 of Alem Dechasa-Desisa, an Ethiopian domestic worker in Lebanon, brought increased scrutiny to the plight of tens of thousands of Ethiopian women working in the Middle East. Many migrant domestic workers incur heavy debts and face recruitment-related abuses in Ethiopia prior to employment abroad, where they risk a wide range of abuses from long hours of work to slavery-like conditions (see chapters on the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon).

Key International Actors

Under Meles Zenawi’s leadership, Ethiopia played an important role in regional affairs: deploying UN peacekeepers to Sudan’s disputed Abyei area, mediating between Sudan and South Sudan, and sending troops into Somalia as part of the international effort to combat al-Shabaab. Ethiopia’s relations with its neighbor Eritrea remain poor following the costly border war of 1998-2000. Eritrea accepted the ruling of an independent boundary commission that awarded it disputed territory; Ethiopia did not.

Ethiopia is an important strategic and security ally for Western governments, and the biggest recipient of development aid in Africa. It now receives approximately US\$3.5 billion in long-term development assistance each year. Donor policies do not appear to have been significantly affected by the deteriorating human rights situation in the country.

The World Bank approved a new Country Partnership Strategy in September that takes little account of the human rights or good governance principles that it and other development agencies say are essential for sustainable development. It also approved a third phase of the Protection of Basic Services program (PBS III) without triggering safeguards on involuntary resettlement and indigenous peoples.
