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Ethiopia: Key Rights Groups Suspended

End Repeated, Arbitrary Harassment of Civil Society Organizations

(Nairobi) – [Ethiopian](#) authorities have [shut down two](#) more prominent human rights organizations in recent weeks as part of their escalating crackdown against civil society, Human Rights Watch said today. The authorities should immediately rescind the decision and stop targeting independent voices.

In late December 2024, the Ethiopian Authority for Civil Society Organizations, a government body that oversees civil society groups, suspended the [Ethiopian Human Rights Council](#), the country's oldest independent human rights organization, and the [Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center](#), on allegations they lacked independence and were acting beyond their mandate.

"The Ethiopian authorities over the past year have waged a relentless assault against human rights groups," said [Mausi Segun](#), Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "By suspending groups engaged in critical human rights documentation and advocacy, the government is showcasing its intolerance of independent scrutiny."

The suspensions came a few weeks after the government's civil society authority had [suspended](#) three other prominent rights groups: the Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD), Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR), and the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE). The authorities temporarily [lifted](#) the suspension of CARD and LHR on December 11, but reinstated it on December 17. The government alleged that the two organizations did not "[learn from past mistakes](#)" and

had not taken corrective measures after receiving a warning. The ban on AHRE was not reinstated.

The suspensions mirror [past intimidating bureaucratic tactics that had crippled](#) human rights work in the country. For [over a decade, Ethiopian authorities restricted](#) the right to freedom of association and the work of civil society organizations through repressive laws such as the 2009 [Charities and Societies Proclamation](#). Under the law, the government had broad discretion to freeze organizations' assets and order their closure. Human Rights Watch [found](#) that the law enabled the government to decimate civil society activities and human rights activism in the country.

In 2019, the Ethiopian government adopted the [Organization of Civil Societies Proclamation](#), which replaced an abusive 2009 proclamation, and removed many of the intrusive powers of the civil society authority.

Article 77(4) of the 2019 law empowers the agency to issue a suspension order if, during the course of its investigation, it finds that the group has carried out a "grave violation of law." Yet article 78 outlines several administrative steps that the agency should take, including issuing warning notices in writing specifying alleged violations, and allowing the relevant organizations adequate time to address concerns, before issuing a suspension.

Human Rights Watch found that the government's allegations against the affected rights organizations, based on vague and politicized grounds, were inconsistent with provisions of the country's civil society law. CARD had also said that the government did not follow the required procedures under the 2019 [Charities and Societies Proclamation](#), including by failing to provide prior written notice that the groups were not in compliance with the law. The four organizations are engaging with the civil society authority regarding their suspensions.

The suspension of prominent rights groups sends a chilling signal to rights advocates regarding the government's intolerance of human rights work, Human Rights Watch said. The suspensions follow a series of government attempts in the past year to silence criticism in the country, including through [arbitrary arrests and detention, surveillance, and threats](#). In July 2024, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed hinted at increased government repression when he [remarked](#) before parliament that it was important to [examine human rights institutions and their procedures](#).

The national Ethiopian Human Rights Commission issued a [statement](#) expressing concern about the recent suspensions. As one of the few human rights entities operating in Ethiopia, the commission, as well as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, should speak out more strongly about the government's increased targeting of civil society groups and human rights defenders.

Independent public scrutiny and documentation of Ethiopia's rights situation also remain crucial to assess the government's willingness to ensure meaningful accountability and redress for ongoing atrocities in the country, notably in the conflict-affected Amhara and Oromia regions.

African regional rights mechanisms, including the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, as well as Ethiopia's foreign partners, notably the [United States](#) and [France](#), should demonstrate their support for the critical role of independent civil society by publicly and privately condemning these suspensions and threats, Human Rights Watch said.

Both the United States and France have provided [assistance](#) to the government's civil society authority that regulates nongovernmental groups and should condition their support on the agency's respect for civil society and civic space. France has also provided [assistance](#) to some of the suspended rights groups. Those donors, together with other countries, have also supported the government's transitional justice process meant to address the atrocities committed during the devastating [two-year conflict in northern Ethiopia](#), as well as abuses in the country since 1995.

The participation of independent civil society organizations, such as the suspended rights groups, is crucial for the credibility of the transitional justice process. Opposition groups and national and international human rights institutions have already [criticized](#) the process for lacking transparency and oversight.

The government's gradual weakening of international involvement [in the transitional justice process](#), despite a [prominent call from Ethiopia's international partners](#), further curtails opportunities for objective scrutiny and monitoring of the process.

The Ethiopian government's hostility to international oversight is not new. However, with ongoing rights abuses, and by largely closing the country to crucial documentation by independent rights groups and regional and international oversight mechanisms, the government has made it difficult to assess whether its transitional justice process is credible and can bring genuine accountability for past and ongoing abuses in the country, Human Rights Watch said.

"Regional and international rights institutions and concerned governments should act in a coordinated, decisive manner to press Ethiopian authorities to halt the attack on human rights defenders in the country," Segun said. "Failing to do so would signal a green light for even more egregious acts of repression."

Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for
Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and
Documentation
(ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße
32, 1041 Wien
T +43 1 589 00 583
F +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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