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Ethiopia: Halt Crackdown Against Human Rights Groups

14 June 2024

The Ethiopian authorities should immediately end their escalating crackdown on civic space and independent domestic human rights organizations, including through physical and digital surveillance, verbal harassment, intimidation, and threats, said five international human rights organizations today. These actions send a chilling signal and prevent human rights organizations from carrying out their essential work to promote and protect human rights and accountability in the country.

In recent months, Ethiopian security and intelligence forces increased the intimidation, harassment, and threats against prominent Ethiopian human rights organizations in the country, including the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), Ethiopia's oldest independent human rights organization.

Since February 2024, government security forces and intelligence personnel have followed staff members of human rights organizations at places of work and at home and demanded that they stop their human rights reporting and work. The threats have escalated in recent weeks. For instance on May 23, security officials [visited](#) EHRCO's branch office in [Addis Ababa](#) in search of information and threatened two staff members in the process. In May, human rights defenders raised the alarm that the harassment and intimidation was continuing and had further intensified.

On April 6, 2024, two security personnel dressed in civilian clothing came to the home of one staff member of the EHRCO and warned them to cease their human rights work or face consequences. This incident followed other similar incidents against EHRCO staff. On January 5, 2023, Ethiopian police [arrested and arbitrarily detained](#) four EHRCO staff members who were investigating cases of forced

evictions outside Addis Ababa. On January 12, 2023, an Oromia court [released](#) the four staff on bail.

On September 6, 2022, security forces [broke up a peace conference](#) organized by a group of 35 local civil society organizations in Addis Ababa. The event was later held online, and the group subsequently issued a [joint statement](#) calling for peace. Two days later, a federal official intimidated the group insisting that they retract their statement. Also in September 2022, the director-general of the Authority for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO) – a federal body mandated to monitor and register all civil society organizations – [told state media](#) that the agency would make organizations working against Ethiopia's sovereignty and public interest accountable by law.

Human rights defenders also shared their concerns that the ACSO stopped registering new human rights civil society organizations since at least August 2023.

Attempts to silence civil society have been accompanied by continued attacks on independent media and coo dissenting voices. Space for civic activities and respect for human rights including the rights to freedom of expression and association in Ethiopia have been undermined over the past few years.

Since the declaration of the state of emergency in Amhara in August 2023, at least [nine journalists](#) have been detained. For instance, Ethio News chief editor [Belay Manaye](#) was detained in Awash Arba military camp in December 6, 2023, without access to health care, family visits, or his lawyers, and under harsh detention conditions. After his relocation to Addis Ababa in late June, authorities did not charge him or bring him before a court of law. On June 17, Ethiopian authorities released Belay from detention.

A [new report](#) from the Ethiopian Press Freedom Defenders, a collective of Ethiopian media professionals, found that around 200 journalists have been arrested by the Ethiopian government since 2019. The Committee to Protect Journalists said that as of late 2023, eight journalists remained in prison, and that four media staff members faced terrorism allegations, which could lead to the death sentence if convicted. For the past 10 months, internet access has also been [restricted](#) in parts of Amhara region where there is an ongoing armed [conflict](#).

Due to the ongoing and growing crackdown on civic space and civil society organizations, several human rights defenders and journalists have fled the country in the past year. These intensified attacks severely reduce independent scrutiny and investigation of government actions and human rights abuses in the country. The growing intolerance for independent human rights reporting and government

criticism echo [previous tactics](#) of harassment, raids on offices, and the imposition of bureaucratic impediments employed by the Ethiopian government against human rights defenders and civil society organizations following the enactment of the [repressive](#) legislation, the Charities and Civil Society Proclamation in 2009. The government significantly reformed this legislation in 2019.

Ethiopian authorities have gone to extreme lengths to stifle independent scrutiny and criticism in clear violation of fundamental rights to freedom of expression and association, the organizations said. Human rights organizations in Ethiopia need to be able to conduct their work without fear of reprisals.

The Ethiopian authorities need to abide by their human rights obligations under the Ethiopian Constitution, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights to freedom of expression, association, and freedom of peaceful assembly.

In 2022 and 2023, the [United Nations Human Rights Committee](#) and the [Committee against Torture](#) respectively recommended to the Ethiopian government to protect journalists, human rights defenders, government critics, and activists against harassment, attacks, or undue interference in the exercise of their professional activities and to take all appropriate measures to prevent the occurrence of acts of intimidation or reprisal and promote a safe and enabling environment for engagement with the United Nations, its representatives, and mechanisms in the field of human rights.

We also urge the authorities to cooperate with the UN Special Procedures, among them the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. The authorities should also cooperate with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACPHR) Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and Focal Point on Reprisals in Africa.

Ethiopia's international and regional partners should press Ethiopian authorities to respect the rights of political opponents, journalists, human rights defenders, and activists, call for scrutiny in this regard by UN human rights bodies, including the UN Human Rights Council, and provide visible recognition, including by issuing public statements, that the situation facing human rights defenders in Ethiopia remains critical.

Signatories:

Amnesty International

Front Line Defenders

Human Rights Watch

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the
Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the
Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders