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Ethiopia: Crackdown on Health Workers' Protests

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Government Should Commit to Addressing Their Grievances

(Nairobi) – The [Ethiopian](#) authorities should immediately rescind the [suspension](#) of a prominent health professionals organization and meaningfully address public healthcare workers' outstanding grievances, Human Rights Watch said today.

The government suspended the Ethiopian Health Professionals Association (EHPA) in early June 2025, following over a month of strikes by public healthcare workers for [better working conditions and adequate pay](#). During the work stoppages, the authorities arbitrarily detained dozens of public healthcare workers across Ethiopia, either without charge or for peacefully exercising basic liberties. On May 30, the EHPA [called for](#) “an immediate stop” to “dismissals from work,” the use of “threats and intimidation,” and vacancy postings aimed at replacing striking professionals.

“Since May, the Ethiopian authorities have resorted to repressive tactics instead of addressing healthcare workers' concerns about their livelihoods and safety,” said [Laetitia Bader](#), deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “The government should immediately lift the suspension of the Ethiopian Health Professionals Association and stop harassing healthcare workers.”

According to 2022 World Health Organization data, Ethiopia's public healthcare spending is [far below the international benchmarks](#) of 0.7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) compared with the average of

1.2 percent for other low-income countries. A surgeon told Human Rights Watch that despite being in the upper echelons of the pay scale, he earned only US\$80 a month. “I cannot even change my shoes,” he said. “I cannot even properly feed my child.”

The Ethiopian Authority for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO), a government body that oversees nongovernmental groups, suspended the EHPA, one of the first groups to endorse the public healthcare workers’ demands. The association took part in discussions organized by the [Ethiopian Human Rights Commission](#) with the government [in late May](#), which did not resolve the issues. On June 21, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed [met with](#) a select group of healthcare professionals.

The EHPA’s president, Yonatan Dagnaw, told the media that ACSO claimed that the association had not held a general assembly or submitted financial reports, and Yonatan was quoted as saying that the association had complied with the “guidelines and laws of the country.” He told the media that he believed that the suspension was linked to the health workers’ [movement](#).

The healthcare workers carried out a month-long [social media campaign](#). On May 13, they [halted](#) non-emergency services at public hospitals and medical teaching institutions across the country.

On May 15, the Health Ministry [ordered](#) striking workers to return to work or face legal action. In the statement, posted on social media, the ministry alleged that unnamed healthcare workers had spread false information about the work stoppages.

Beginning in early May, the authorities arrested, detained, and then released dozens of doctors, including Yonatan. On May 23, the Ethiopian Police Commission [announced](#) that it had detained 47 healthcare workers, including physicians and medical residents. An online healthcare workers’ group told Human Rights Watch that 148 healthcare workers had been arrested between early May and early June, though this figure could not be corroborated.

Several doctors, a doctor’s relative, and members of healthcare organizations described cases of harassment and arbitrary detention. For example, the authorities detained Dr. Mahlet Guush, a pathologist, for over three weeks in the Addis Ababa Police Commission headquarters, after the BBC’s *Focus on Africa* [podcast](#) interviewed her regarding conditions facing medical professionals in the country. Officials arrested her without a warrant and searched her house, seizing two laptops and two mobile phones, a source said.

The authorities initially said in a letter to the First Instance Court that they were investigating her along with eight others, “most of them doctors,” for inciting violence and unrest in the country by allegedly coordinating with

“anti-peace” groups. They also accused those detained of “abandoning their duties” and “conspiring to erode public trust in the government.” The police never charged the group members and released them all by June 12.

In Ethiopia’s embattled Amhara region, local militias arrested a physician and other hospital staff who had participated in a short protest and transferred them to police custody, where they spent a week in detention. The physician said he was arrested without a warrant and was never brought to court and charged. “I think they want to intimidate the health workers,” he said. “They simply said I was with the opposition armed forces around there.” After his release, the authorities threatened him and two other detained healthcare workers. “They said if there is anything again, you are in trouble,” he said. “It will be hard for you if something like this happens again.”

Although Ethiopia’s labor proclamation [prohibits](#) medical practitioners from striking, the authorities have not invoked it, as far as Human Rights Watch has been able to determine. The country’s civil servants’ proclamation, which regulates public healthcare workers, [does not prohibit strikes](#). The Health Ministry accused healthcare workers who had gone on strike of violating the civil servants’ proclamation by committing misconduct that could harm their healthcare institution.

[International human rights law](#), including International Labour Organization conventions, protects the right to strike but [allows for some restrictions](#) on that right under domestic law, including with regard to workers who provide essential services like health care. Article 42 of the [Ethiopian Constitution](#) broadly embraces that approach, affirming the right to strike but with some limitations.

Lawful restrictions on the right of healthcare workers to strike do not permit the authorities to harass, bring criminal charges against, or deprive healthcare workers of their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly protected under international human rights law, Human Rights Watch said.

“The Ethiopian authorities won’t be able to tackle the country’s serious healthcare problems by suspending doctors’ associations or by harassing and jailing healthcare workers,” Bader said. “The government should instead address healthcare workers’ legitimate concerns through meaningful dialogue.”

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