

# Testimony before the European Parliament on the fuming political crisis in Ethiopia

By Aregawi Berhe, vice chairman of the Europe Chapter of United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF)

## **Mr. Chairman and leading Committee Members,**

Thank you for your time, your patience and above all your concern and on going endeavour to find a lasting solution for the predicaments befalling Ethiopia.

Ethiopia, under the EPRDF, is really in a deep political and socio-economic crisis with people protesting this dismal condition throughout the country day in day out. This regime is trying to repress the nation-wide protest with street assassination, arbitrary arrest, mysterious disappearances and mass killings. Such draconian tactics are only leading to uncontrollable violent conflicts.

As we speak, the state of the basic human and democratic rights in the country is grim and extremely alarming.

- Ordinary Ethiopians in their tens of thousands are languishing in secret prisons, atrocities are committed across the country, families are not informed the whereabouts of their loved ones. On 16 January 2006, the Ethiopian government has announced the release of over 11,000 prisoners. However, the exact figure of those still in detention is still unknown.

- All CUD leaders, critical journalists, human rights activists and civil society leaders are incarcerated and together with 131 individuals are charged with "treason" and "attempted genocide". All the charges are politically motivated in the aftermath of the 15 May 2005 election. Remotely positioned from these concocted allegations, I am also one of the accused persons, which only indicates that I am considered a bitter political opponent to the unpopular regime in power.

The charges against some individuals, among them 5 VOA journalists, were dropped recently, but the irony is the others are languishing in abject prison conditions on the same baseless charges.

Since it seized power in 1991, gross violation of human and democratic rights, marked by outright killings, was the response of the EPRDF to curb peaceful and legitimate opposition. Let me revert to a few gruesome facts:

\* Massacre , at Addis Ababa University alone 12 students were killed in 1991, 32 in 1995 and 41 in 2005 (save the wounded) simply because they held a peaceful protest rally in front of their campus against unpopular policies of the regime,

\* Mysterious disappearances, I recall one of many that of Hagos Atsbaha in 1992, a father of 4 kids, and also my brother-in-law,

\* Street assassinations, I recall one of many that of Assefa Maru in 1994, a human rights activist,

\* In Gambella / southwest Ethiopia 424 educated Anuaks were massacred on 13 December 2003, (Please refer Mr. Obang Metho's Testimony to the US House Committee on Global Human Rights and International Operations, 27 March 2006),

These few samples were not ordinary incidents but are part of a **pattern** over the last 15 years that manifests itself throughout the country, as a means of repressing if not eliminating peaceful challenges and dissenting voices.

- This repressive conduct of the EPRDF is inherent in a totalitarian ideology which Meles Zenawi calls "revolutionary democracy". The genesis of this ideology goes back to July 1985 when Meles Zenawi publicly formed his party, the Marxist Leninist League of Tigris (MLLT). This party is still the **informal backbone** of the current government.

- Ethiopia under EPRDF is also in a deep social crisis, where urban unemployment stands well above 40%. This huge unemployed army predominantly of youngsters is poised to rise up any time against the state. From Gambella in the west to Ogaden in the east and from Welega in the south to Gondar and Tigray in the north, armed uprisings are building up because democrats and patriotic citizens could not find the political space that enables them to operate peacefully.

**With this brief background, let me get you through the dismal realities in my country, during and after the election of May 2005.**

The EPRDF created an **election board** composed of only its own members in violation of the principles of positioning a neutral body to organize, administer and conduct free, fair and inclusive elections that respect the will and are acceptable by the electorate. All parties in the opposition (including Dr. Beyene's while he was part of the UEDF) called for an independent national election board to be set up in advance but this legitimate pre-condition for a free and fair election was **ignored, also in 1994 by the international community** that could have pressed to make it happen and save the nation from the dreadful crisis it is entangled in now.

Despite this fact and left with no option, the UEDF decided to participate in the election process with the grim hope of at least mobilizing the people to embrace a peaceful and democratic engagement.

- Relative press freedom in the capital city Addis Ababa peeped out for a while to impress diplomats, donors and other foreign observers. Today, this freedom does not exist any more.  
- The truth of this fact is more vivid in Tigray, where I come from (and which is the home base of the TPLF, the core element of the EPRDF). That ephemeral relative press freedom did not exist at all in Tigray. Like a private backyard, Tigray is the domain of Meles Zenawi and his cohorts where absolute conformity is enforced. Neither free press nor an opposition party was allowed to operate in Tigray. State monopoly (known as *Wudebawi* in Tigrigna) is the commanding feature of the economy. If you want to know Tigrayans are the most impoverished people under this system, have a look at the streets of Addis. Tigray virtually is a region in prison.

The relative competition of candidates for parliamentary seats that we saw in other parts of Ethiopia did not occur in Tigray. All candidates of the UEDF (including its secretary Ato Dereje Kebede) were harassed and chased out from Mekele, the capital of Tigray, by EPRDF cadres and armed agents to a give free ride for EPRDF candidates to run without contenders. For instance, the only candidate in Adwa was Meles Zenawi.

Ato Tesfay Hagos, one of the UEDF candidates from Tigray, has disappeared since then. EPRDF expects absolute loyalty from Tigrayans, hence absolute dictatorship reigns in this region of Ethiopia.

Despite the hurdles, the Ethiopian population massively voted on 15 May 2005. The outcome of the result was far beyond the expectation of the regime. Meles Zenawi called the orchestration of the May elections “a calculated risk”.

**The aftermath of the election is again another episode where the dictatorship and repression revealed their true nature.**

Meles Zenawi and his ruling party, EPRDF, were not satisfied with the rigging of the elections alone and did not stop there. No more “calculated risk”, they changed the parliamentary rules and regulations in order to bar opposition members willing to work with it from putting items on the agenda for discussion. What used to be set on the agenda with 20% of parliamentarians was now raised to 51%, which means parliament can discuss issues of interest to the EPRDF only – a perfidy which completely undermines the role of the opposition.

Equally treacherous was the act of slashing Addis Ababa’s tax revenue after observing that the CUD had won the city council.

In a nutshell, Ethiopia, at this time, is ruled by a terrorist dictator who doesn’t have any regards to the rights of the people or to the plea of international community. This situation, unless reversed on time, will lead us to dangerous crisis which may put the nation itself at a risk of civil war.

**What should the response of international community including EU be?**

I am very grateful for the concern and endeavours of the European Parliament to mitigate the dismal conditions in Ethiopia. I also sincerely thank the EU Observer mission that witnessed the May 2005 election and gave an honest and a down-to-earth report, although it drew unjustified insults from those who rigged the election and are now clinging to power.

The point at stake is however whether the dictators in power who rig elections, who shower bullets on peaceful demonstrators, who impoverish the whole nation, should be rewarded or removed? Conversely, should the people who rejected dictatorship and opted for democratic and peaceful transition be rewarded or punished?

Distinguished Parliamentarians, this is the explicit choice before you and us.

The response of the international community to the crisis in Byelorussia was indeed commendable. We recall Western ambassadors staging a rally together with the population of Byelorussia to protest against the result of the vote. Finally, targeted sanction measures have been taken against Byelorussian leaders for democracy to take its rightful course. But for the same, if not worse, election scandal followed by mass killings in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Prime Minister has not received commensurate measure. To the dismay of many, he was even invited to Berlin, London and Brussels shortly afterwards.

Allow me to pose a question to you as parliamentarians. How are you to explain this double standard in the case of Ethiopia? By the way, is there any standard for Ethiopia per se? I leave it for your conscience!

**As compelling the situation is, we have to overcome the current political impasse in Ethiopia before it is too late. Therefore the UEDF proposes the following:**

- Urgently organize an international conference on the situation in Ethiopia, comprising the opposition parties, the government, and civil society organizations, which should lead to a genuine, peaceful democratic transition. **(Aware of the dangers the nation was to face and to solve the impending political impasse following the elections, UEDF along with CUD had called for the formation of a Transitional Government of National Unity. Sadly, but not surprisingly, it was**

rejected right away by EPRDF leaders. A transitional arrangement comprising all stakeholders is the way forward. We have outlined this process in our Alternative National Political Programme.)

- The EU can take an initiative to appoint a Facilitator for national dialogue, as it has done for the Democratic Republic of Congo, Togo and other countries.

-The conference shall facilitate the formation of an Independent Electoral Commission to be in place.

- Win or lose an election, the UEDF will abide by the decision of the majority and is ready to work within a democratic system.

- Meanwhile we ask the EU to urge the EPRDF to release all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience immediately & without any preconditions and lift all draconian restrictions on the inalienable basic rights of the people. We renew our call for the establishment of an international commission of enquiry into the Mass killings and arbitrary arrests. We also urge the EU to make it abundantly clear to EPRDF leaders that failure to comply with its demands will result in targeted measures.

- Finally, we call upon the international Community including the EU help push forward the democratisation process based on the principles enshrined in its covenants. Conflict prevention policy is of no use once a violent conflict erupts. The real conflict prevention strategy lies in the realization of peaceful democratic transition proposed, and now is the right moment to save the nation in one of its most dangerous crises.

Thank you so much.

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