

# House Subcommittee ponders over Ethiopia's Troubled Internal Situation

*"During my visit to Addis last August, I met with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, and I asked him why he had not investigated the June shootings of demonstrators by agents of his government. His response was that the investigation might require the arrest of opposition leaders, and he didn't want to do*

*that while by-elections were still scheduled. He went on to tell me that he had dossiers on all the opposition leaders and could arrest them for treason whenever he wanted. Thus, their arrests were all but certain even before the events that ostensibly led to their being incarcerated.... America's commitment to promote the respect for human rights around the world*



*demands that we examine the current situation in Ethiopia and that we prevail upon our ally to live up to its international human rights commitments while this situation can still be salvaged.”* - Opening statement by Chairman Chris Smith at the House Subcommittee on Africa hearing on Ethiopia's Troubled Internal Situation, March 28, 2006.

The House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations, chaired by Congressman Chris Smith, conducted a hearing on March 28, 2006, in Washington DC, regarding Ethiopia's troubled internal situation. At the hearing, the Subcommittee invited the following witnesses to testify: Deputy Assistant Secretary Bureau of African Affairs of the U.S. Department of State, Honorable Donald Y. Yamamoto, Chargé d'Affaires Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Mr. Fesseha A. Tessema, Central Council Member of Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party, Mr. Andargachew Tsege, Director of International Advocacy for the Anuak Justice Council, Mr. Obang Metho, Advocacy Director for Africa of Amnesty International, Ms. Lynn Fredricksson, and daughter of Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam, Ethiopian Prisoner of Conscience, Dr. Meqdes Mesfin.

With the exception of Fesseha A. Tessema and Donald Y. Yamamoto, the rest of the witnesses gave chilling accounts of gross and widespread human rights violations of the EPRDF government. They placed before the Subcommittee, damning reports of the ruling party's systematic manipulation of the May 2005 elections to ensure its victory, and the violence it resorted to, to squash all who challenged the results.

On the other hand, Assistant Secretary Yamamoto's views on the outcome of the May 2005 election are similar to that of the Ethiopian government. He said the election was unprecedented and historical in the country's 3000 years of history. He portrayed the opposition parties as power mongers who were emboldened by their apparent victory. He said, "Their unexpected political gains inspired the confidence to insist on more political control of the process, and they pressed for a review of the 299 seats they lost to the EPRDF." While praising the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) for its "notable job," he urged the elected members of CUD who are not in prison to "take their seats in Parliament" and the elected Addis Ababa City Counselors to take over City Hall. He expressed his views of the overall election results as "generally credible." Casually acknowledging the ongoing violence in the country, he said, "The post-2005 election problems point to the need for capacity building and further reform," that could significantly improve the election in 2010.

The stark divergence of Deputy Assistant Secretary Yamamoto's remarks from the State Department's March 8, 2006 report on Human Rights Practices in Ethiopia, appears startling. It leads to the conclusion that Mr. Yamamoto was probably expressing his personal views on the ground situation rather than presenting the official stance of the State Department. His obvious partiality appeared to prevent him from being a neutral representative of the US government. Given the deteriorating political conditions in Ethiopia, the State Department might be better served by replacing Mr. Yamamoto with an official who can effectively broker a deal between the ruling party and the opposition groups.

Director of International Advocacy for the Anuak Justice Council, Mr. Obang Metho, placed before the Subcommittee, information that indicated the alarming possibility of a failed Ethiopia. According to Mr. Metho, Ethiopia's ruling party is systematically fueling ethnic tensions against the Anuaks, a farming minority in southwestern Ethiopia, by committing mass murder, rape, and torture and thus depopulating the areas with large oil reservoirs. He revealed that Ethiopia's ruling party has subcontracted the drilling to Zhongyum Petroleum Exploration Bureau, a Chinese government firm, and its subsidiary Petronas of Malaysia. Successful drilling was expected to begin as early as February 2006. To ensure the safety of Asian oil workers, the Anuaks are on the verge of extinction. Mr. Metho provided detailed evidence of how top government officials of EPRDF in Addis Ababa conceived "Operation Sunny Mountain," a blue print for government troops to reduce the population systematically, to eliminate those deemed as threats to the plan, and to turn the rest into "slave-laborers." The unnerving accounts of widespread and gross human rights violations are strongly reminiscent of Darfur.

Said Mr. Metho, "US military aid is being used against Ethiopian citizens as a means of prolonging the life of this regime. Consequently, the suffering of the intended beneficiaries of the aid is also being prolonged. American taxpayers should protest having paid for the US military aid to Ethiopia that funded the purchase of American made weapons used in the killing of innocent Anuak in the genocide of December 2003 [and onward]."

Challenging the US government's assertion that Ethiopia's ruling party is an ally in the war against terrorism, he said, "The government of the EPRDF can be best known by their actions. Instead of being partners in stabilizing the Horn of Africa, they are a government deeply entrenched in the use of terroristic tactics of oppression against their own citizens, accomplished in manipulating the truth to cover up for it and in hanging on to power lest they ever be held accountable." He raised a very pertinent point. "The question is, how long will the Ethiopian people put up with this before a full-blown crisis results?" Mr. Metho defined Ethiopia as "a potentially failing state" that needs significant diplomatic and economic intervention to avert a national crisis and to protect its citizens from additional suffering and loss of life. He said, "An imploded Ethiopia can certainly be more dangerous to the US than exerting pressure for diplomatic solutions at this time." He added that for years, the Ethiopian people considered the US as allies and friends, but that recently, they were disappointed and disillusioned by the lack of attention and action directed towards the continent of Africa. He spoke of the increasing criticism of US rhetoric that appeared irrelevant to Ethiopia. "Ethiopians are reaching out for help, but are not being heard," he said. He recommended, among other things, that the US government should exert pressure on Ethiopia's ruling party, to end the government-sponsored terror, to immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners, and to drop "the absurd charges of treason and genocide" against leadership of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD). He urged the US government to engage as an honest peace-broker between the ruling party and the opposition groups to find a peaceful solution to the growing political issues.

Echoing Mr. Metho's call for speedy US intervention to persuade the EPRDF to negotiate with the opposition groups, was Mr. Andargachew Tsege, member of the Central Council of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUD). Mr. Andargachew sustained extensive damage to his left eye while being tortured by EPRDF soldiers. He gave first hand observations as a campaigner and election observer for CUD prior to and following the May 2005 election. He testified that the process leading up to the election was marred by serious irregularities, but "our hope for democracy made us think those problems were small. We did not realize [that] it would get much worse." Mr. Andargachew said that although the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians voted for the opposition parties, the ruling party significantly altered the election results and declared victory. He recounted how the outraged voters demanded that the opposition parties boycott joining Parliament and to demand for thorough investigations by independent national and international observers. He added that the ruling party, via its military, had implemented several drastic measures to quell peaceful demonstrators. For instance, they shot innocent protestors with live ammunition, arrested the entire political leadership of CUD on charges of "treason and genocide," and shut down independent media. Said Mr. Andargachew, "Hidden from the eyes of the international media and community, Ethiopia's rural farmers have suffered the brunt of the repression. Silent evenings in rural Ethiopia have been replaced by the heart wrenching cries of peasants tortured by EPRDF cadre."

While applauding Congressman Chris Smith for authoring HR 4423, Mr. Andargachew urged the Subcommittee to include in the bill the eight preconditions put forward by the CUD leadership to resume political dialogue.

Dr. Meqdes Mesfin, daughter of Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam, founder of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) and one of the arrested CUD leaders, outlined the fundamental objectives of EHRCO and its years of activities to promote those objectives. In light of what transpired in the aftermath of the May 2005 election, she said, "It is now up to humanity to stand firmly on the side of the people and do its utmost in creating the conditions that would compel the unconditional and immediate release of the prisoners of conscience that are paraded through the legal system. To call for their 'fair and speedy trial' is a travesty." She, too, urged Congress to persuade Ethiopia's ruling party to accept the eight preconditions as a necessary first step to jumpstart the political process. "Compromising these principles would only jeopardize the strength of any legislation, enabling the arbitrary suspension of the democratic process and the rule of law as needed," said Dr. Meqdes.

Advocacy Director for Africa, Amnesty International USA, Ms. Lynn Fredriksson said, "Amnesty International holds that the charges of 'treason,' 'outrages against the Constitution,' 'organizing and inciting armed rebellion' and 'acts of genocide' levied against some of 131 CUD leaders, human rights defenders and journalists (most of whom are in physical custody) have no merit." She highlighted the EPRDF government's unfair targeting of ethnic Ethiopians throughout the country, particularly in the Oromo, Somali and Gambella regions. She alerted the Subcommittee on Ethiopia's ruling party's increased "surveillance and intimidation tactics." It appears that since 2004, the EPRDF developed two sub-levels of political organization below the kebele, that is, the gott and the garee. As Ms. Fredriksson explained, "Essentially, every rural kebele is divided into groups of 60-90 households called gotts, and these are further divided into groups of 10-20 households called garees. Each administrative office is then staffed by EPRDF supporters tasked with reporting all household activities. The political implications of this are ominous." She implored the Congressional Subcommittee to "make human rights central to U.S. relations with the Government of Ethiopia and Ethiopian civil society."

Congressman Smith should be commended for his continuing leadership in promoting peace, democracy and the rule of law in Ethiopia. No doubt, under his able leadership, the US Administration will formulate a policy to serve the interests of the US as well as those of the people of Ethiopia.

*(Photo shows Chairman Chris Smith shaking hands with Ethiopian human rights activist Obang Metho during a March 27, 2006 U.S. Congressional Hearing on the political crisis in Ethiopia)*

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