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## **Kerry's Ethiopia Opportunity**

*The U.S. secretary of state's visit to Addis Ababa is a chance to pressure the government on its dreadful record on human rights.*

By: Martin Schibbye and Patrick Griffith

This month, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry will travel to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to attend the 21st African Union (AU) summit. The message he brings will speak volumes about the future of American engagement on the continent.

In announcing the visit during a U.S. Senate hearing last month, Mr. Kerry expressed concern about the potentially negative impact of China's and Iran's increased presence in Africa. He noted that graft and poor development choices could undermine the stability of some African governments, and he acknowledged the need for more U.S. engagement.

Further American cooperation on development and security would be good news for Africa. But the U.S. must continue to focus on another potentially destabilizing factor in the continent: ongoing violations of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Since their inception, the AU and its precursor, the Organization of African Unity, have embraced the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights expressly protects a raft of basic human rights, including freedom of association, free expression and political participation. But despite these affirmations, the protection of such rights remains inconsistent across AU nations. Some governments continue to ignore certain provisions entirely.

If he needs an example, Mr. Kerry need only look out his window in Addis Ababa. This month the Ethiopian Supreme Court upheld an 18-year prison sentence against independent journalist Eskinder Nega.

Though the Ethiopian government is often touted as a close U.S. partner on security and poverty-reduction efforts, it has a dreadful record on rights. After parliamentary elections in 2005, the government jailed opposition leaders such as former judge Birtukan Mideksa and independent journalists who reported on the post-election unrest.

Mr. Nega and his wife Serkalem Fasil, herself a prominent publisher, were among those arrested. They spent 17 months in a detention center on trumped-up charges of treason and genocide before they were finally released. Pregnant at the time of her arrest, Ms. Fasil was denied prenatal care for seven months and gave birth to their son Nafkot while in custody.

In the spring of 2011, as popular uprisings gathered momentum across North Africa and the Middle East, Mr. Nega wrote extensively about their possible impact on Ethiopia. Despite warnings that he was going too far, Mr. Nega continued to write and speak publicly, often criticizing the government and calling for democratic reforms, while emphasizing the importance of nonviolence. But like fellow journalists Reeyot Alemu and Woubshet Taye, and opposition activists such as Andualem Aragie, Mr. Nega was charged in September 2011 under Ethiopia's widely criticized 2009 Antiterrorism Proclamation. He now faces 18 years in prison.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has expressed grave alarm at Ethiopia's persecution of journalists and peaceful activists. In April the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention also weighed in, declaring Mr. Nega's detention illegal under international law and calling for his immediate release. But these admonitions have so far not convinced Ethiopian authorities to change course.

When U.S. President [Barack Obama](#) laid out his administration's agenda for sub-Saharan Africa last summer, he emphasized strong democratic institutions and respect for the rule of law, noting that these promote both prosperity and stability. But as long as journalists and political activists are imprisoned for speaking their truth to power, such principles will remain illusory.

Mr. Kerry has an important opportunity this month to convey that very message to his counterparts in Addis Ababa. Mr. Nega and his colleagues deserve nothing less.

*Mr. Schibbye is a Swedish journalist who was detained in Ethiopia for 14 months under the country's antiterror laws and held at Kaliti Prison with Eskinder Nega. Mr. Griffith is an attorney with Freedom Now, a legal advocacy organization that works to free prisoners of conscience, including Mr. Nega.*