

Advocates Petition UN to Intervene on Jailed Ethiopian Bloggers' Behalf

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Last April, nine writers were arrested and imprisoned in association with Ethiopia's Zone 9 blogging collective. Eleven weeks later, they were charged under the nation's Anti-Terrorism Proclamation. Since their arrest, Soleyana Gebremicheal and Endalk Chala, two members of the collective who now live in the United States, have advocated tirelessly for their colleagues' release. Global Voices is honored to publish this original contribution by Soleyana and her colleague, Patrick Griffith, who are now petitioning the [UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) ^[1] to intervene on the bloggers' behalf.

By [Soleyana S. Gebremicheal](#) ^[2] and [Patrick Griffith](#) ^[3]

Despite early, high-level condemnation of the arrests of independent journalists and bloggers in Ethiopia nine months ago, international attention has waned as the pre-trial proceedings have dragged-on. The government's continued detention of three independent journalists and six members of the Zone 9 blogging collective is not only an outrageous attack on the press – it is also illegal and unconscionable.

After its founding in May 2012, the Zone 9 blog received widespread attention from Ethiopian activists and academics who used the site to promote political rights enshrined under both international and Ethiopian law. For a time, they managed to operate in an [increasingly restrictive media environment](#) ^[4]. When access to the site was blocked inside the country, members circulated articles through social media. When authorities summoned the contributors for questioning and accused them of threatening national security in 2013, the group temporarily stopped writing about political issues. But when the activists announced that they would revive the site and focus on Ethiopia's upcoming national elections scheduled for May 2015, the government response was swift – within

days, six members of Zone 9 and three independent journalists who knew them socially were behind bars.

Eventually, the government charged all nine detainees with terrorism and treason.

The use of [overly broad](#) ^[5] national security laws to silence peaceful activists may seem like a surprising overreaction to online activism, but in Ethiopia, politicized prosecutions have become commonplace. Since the government passed the widely-criticized 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, prosecutors have cast an ever-widening net in an attempt to silence any kind of dissent. The government has applied the Proclamation to detain critical journalists, opposition activists, and religious protesters – apparently unconcerned that misusing such laws threatens to seriously undermine its credibility with security allies in a region with very real terror threats.

The condemnation of such tactics has been nearly universal. The former [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) ^[6], the [African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights](#) ^[7], and political leaders – including [US Secretary of State John Kerry](#) ^[8] – have all called for an end to the imprisonment of peaceful writers and activists on terrorism charges. In the case of the imprisoned Ethiopian publisher Eskinder Nega, the [UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) ^[9] specifically found that the government violated international law when it sentenced him to 18 years in prison under the 2009 Anti-Terror Proclamation. Despite such calls, however, the prosecutions have continued.

It has now been nine months since Ethiopian authorities arrested the Zone 9 bloggers and their journalist friends. During the first three months, they were held at the notorious Maekelawi police station in Addis Ababa, where [reports](#) ^[10] indicate that torture is rampant. In fact, a complaint prepared by the group for the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission indicates that authorities severely mistreated some detainees while interrogating them about their criticism of the government and their contacts with international human rights organizations. Some were beaten, gagged, deprived of food and sleep, subjected to cold temperatures, and threatened not to report the mistreatment. The women were insulted during questioning and faced harassment and intimidation based on their gender. All of them were forced to sign false confessions.

Although the government has held [16 preliminary hearings](#) ^[11], the trial has yet to begin. If past cases are any indication, however, the outcome has already been determined. That is why the Ethiopian Human Rights Project and Freedom Now have filed a [petition](#) ^[1] with the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which shows that the continued imprisonment of these peaceful activists violates international law. The work of these activists and journalists advocating for basic rights is clearly protected under international law and the treaties that the Ethiopian government has ratified, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. As such, the government's imprisonment of these individuals on spurious terror charges is arbitrary and illegal.

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URLs in this post:

[1] UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention: <http://www.freedom-now.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/UNWGAD-Petition-Zone-9-Ethiopia-1.26.15.pdf>

[2] Soleyana S. Gebremicheal: <https://twitter.com/Ehrproj>

[3] Patrick Griffith : <https://twitter.com/freedomnoworg>

[4] increasingly restrictive media environment: http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/21/ethiopia-media-being-decimated%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank

[5] overly broad: http://africlaw.com/2013/08/30/ethiopias-anti-terrorism-proclamation-and-the-right-to-freedom-of-expression/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank

[6] UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14555&LangID=E%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank

[7] African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights:

http://www.achpr.org/sessions/51st/resolutions/218/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank

[8] US Secretary of State John Kerry: http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/01/us-ethiopia-bloggers-usa-idUSBREA400T920140501%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank

[9] UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention: http://www.unwgadatabase.org/un/Document.aspx?id=2898%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank

[10] reports: http://www.hrw.org/reports/2013/10/17/they-want-confession-0%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank

[11] 16 preliminary hearings: http://trialtrackerblog.org/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank