



FREEDOM NOW

Honorary Chair  
The Most Reverend Desmond M. Tutu

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**Media Release**

**Ethiopian Bloggers Acquitted of Terrorism Charges, Three Released from Prison**

Washington, D.C.: Freedom Now and the Ethiopia Human Rights Project (EHRP) are very happy to announce that five members of the Zone 9 blogger group in Ethiopia have been acquitted of terrorism charges and three were released from prison on Saturday, October 17. After detaining them for nearly 18 months, authorities released Atnaf Berhane, Natnail Feleke, and Abel Wabella. Blogger Befekadu Hailu remains in prison and faces the new charge of inciting violence. Zone 9 member Soliyana Gebremichael was acquitted in absentia.

“We welcome the court’s long overdue decision,” said EHRP’s Coordinator and Zone 9 member Soliyana Gebremichael. “My colleagues were guilty of nothing more than championing human rights and calling for government reform, which is not a crime, but is our right. I hope that my colleagues will not face further persecution.”

“The release of these three individuals is a victory for freedom of expression in Ethiopia,” said Freedom Now’s Executive Director Maran Turner. “However, the trial of the Zone 9 bloggers demonstrated the Ethiopian government’s disregard for international human rights standards and the rights of dissenting voices. We join the international community in calling for the release of all prisoners of conscience in Ethiopia, including Zone 9 member Befekadu Hailu and journalist Eskinder Nega.”

Founded in May 2012, the Zone 9 blog sought to establish a forum for independent reporting at a time when the space for non-government sanctioned reporting in Ethiopia had become stifled and unwelcome. Articles on the Zone 9 blog website examined topics such as government respect for constitutional norms and the citizens’ rights to free expression and freedom of assembly. The blog ceased operating in the fall of 2013 after escalating harassment by government officials. Shortly before the blog was scheduled to resume in April 2014, the Ethiopian government arrested six Zone 9 bloggers and three journalists.

All nine detainees were held in pre-trial detention until July 2014 when they were charged under the widely criticized 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation for “working with foreign organizations that claim to be human rights activists and agreeing in getting financial and intellectual assistance to incite public violence through social media.” Since that time, trial proceedings were delayed 39 times and tellingly were even suspended during the recent national election. Two Zone 9 bloggers and three journalists, who had all been arrested along with the three men who were released on Saturday, were freed in July 2015.

Freedom Now and the Ethiopia Human Rights Project partnered together to advocate for the release of the Zone 9 bloggers and journalists.

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*Our mission is to free prisoners of conscience through focused legal, political and public relations advocacy efforts.*