

## **Joint letter requesting Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn to remove arbitrary restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and association in Ethiopia**

October 9, 2012

Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn  
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia  
Office of the Prime Minister  
P.O. Box 1031  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

### **Re: Restrictions on Civil Society and Media**

Dear Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn,

As you assume the Premiership of Ethiopia, we, the undersigned organisations and individuals, would like to take the opportunity to raise with you a number of issues which we urge you to address as a matter of priority. We believe that you now have the opportunity to set a new standard of responsible and accountable leadership and to usher in a new era of promotion of human rights and respect for the rule of law. We call upon your government to take steps immediately to begin this process, in accordance with the Ethiopian Constitution and Ethiopia's obligations under international human rights law and standards. This should begin with the release from prison of journalists, political opposition party members and other dissidents detained for the peaceful expression of their political views. We urge you to acknowledge and respect the role of civil society and a press corps free of unnecessary or excessive state control, as essential, if sometimes adversarial, partners to the attainment of Ethiopia's human rights and development goals.

Mr. Prime Minister, Ethiopia faces serious challenges in food security, poverty, climate change and regional stability. Civil society organisations and independent media practitioners not only have full rights to freedom of expression and association, but are also important stakeholders in responding to these challenges. We urge your government to enable and protect the ability of all segments of society to participate in the public affairs of the country and freely contribute ideas and work, and we urge you to allow the unfettered expression of the natural diversity of views allowed by the Constitution and international law. We note that the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia gives due precedence to the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms and their interpretation in a manner consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights treaties ratified by Ethiopia.

Over the past few years, many civil society organisations, journalists and political dissidents have faced harassment and prosecution while peacefully exercising such freedoms. Several

journalists remain in prison on terrorism and anti-state charges that were based on their peaceful activities including voicing criticism of the government, calling for reform and reporting on opposition movements.

For instance, prominent journalist and human rights defender, Eskinder Nega, was arrested on 14 September 2011, just days after publishing an article questioning the imprisonment of eminent actor Debebe Eshetu as a terrorist suspect and participating in a meeting where the issue of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa was discussed. He was convicted of participation in a terrorism network on the basis of a video of this public political forum, in which he spoke about whether the popular uprisings could spread to Ethiopia. He was sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment on 13 July 2012. Journalists Woubshet Taye and Reyot Alemu have also been sentenced to lengthy prison terms based on their involvement in and reporting on criticism of the government. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have expressed alarm concerning the cases of journalists and other dissidents convicted of terrorism offences, and have called on the government to review the Anti-Terrorism law to ensure it complies with international human rights standards.

We thus urge your government, at this opportune moment, to consider and protect the vital role that independent journalists, civil society organisations and political dissidents play in holding the government to account for its performance on its domestic and international human rights obligations.

We appeal to you to restore the faith of the Ethiopian people and the international community in the Ethiopian state and lead a government which draws its strength and legitimacy from the pluralistic inclusion of different voices from all segments of society.

We believe the following measures would show your strong leadership in upholding human rights and civil society freedoms: (i) order the immediate and unconditional release of imprisoned dissidents and journalists, (ii) amend provisions of the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation which are overbroad to the extent that they encompass and therefore criminalise the peaceful exercise of fundamental rights, (iii) amend the 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation to remove restrictions on civil society activities and funding of human rights organisations, (iv) cooperate with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to review the Charities and Societies Proclamation (2009) and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (2009), and (v) extend an open invitation to UN Special Procedures mandate holders to visit Ethiopia. As Ethiopia is standing as a candidate for the UN Human Rights Council, we encourage your government to include these measures in its election pledges.

We would be pleased to discuss these matters with you further.

Sincerely,

1. **Action for Fundamental Change and Development, Uganda**
2. **Action Solidaire de la Jeunesse pour le Développement Communautaire (ASOEDEC), Democratic Republic of the Congo**
3. **AfriMAP, South Africa**
4. **Amnesty International**
5. **Campaign Against Illiteracy and Ignorance, Nigeria**
6. **Centre for Legal Empowerment, Kenya**
7. **CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation**
8. **Committee to Free Eskinder Nega**
9. **Committee to Protect Journalists**
10. **East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project**
11. **Freedom Now**
12. **Front Line Defenders**
13. **Human Rights Network Uganda (HURINET-U), Uganda**
14. **Human Rights Watch**
15. **International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)**
16. **International Press Institute**
17. **League for Human Rights in the Great Lakes Region, Rwanda**
18. **League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Right in Rwanda (LIPRODHOR), Rwanda**
19. **Ligue Iteka, Burundi**
20. **National Civic Forum, Sudan**
21. **PEN American Center**
22. **Réseau des Organisations de la Société Civile pour le Développement, (RESOCIDE), Burkina Faso**
23. **South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network, South Sudan**
24. **South Sudan Human Rights Society for Advocacy, (SSHURSA), South Sudan**

- 25. Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA Network), Uganda**
- 26. Swedish International Liberal Centre**
- 27. West African Human Rights Defenders Network (WAHRDN), Togo**
- 28. World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers**
- 29. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)**