

Ethiopia and the State of Democracy: its Effects on the Humanitarian and Human Rights Situation in the Ogaden and Somalia

Opening Statement

Rep. Donald M. Payne

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Good morning and welcome. Today's hearing is on the state of Ethiopia's democracy and its effect on the humanitarian and human rights situation in the Ogaden region and Somalia. Let me be clear at the outset, this is not a hearing on Eritrea. We do not want to divert attention and focus from the stated objectives of this hearing.

Political and human rights conditions in Ethiopia have been of particular concern to this Committee for some time. Congressman Smith and I introduced a bill during the last Congress to push for the release of all political prisoners, accountability, and democratization in Ethiopia.

As you know, in a few hours, the House of Representatives will take up H.R. 2003, the Ethiopia Democracy and Accountability Act. The Ethiopian government spent tens of thousands of dollars on lobbyists to kill the bill. The message is clear. Congress is not for sale.

I was cautiously optimistic in 2005 that political and human rights conditions will improve after the elections. Indeed, the elections were much better organized and highly competitive compared to previous elections. I must confess, I was wrong. In fact, conditions got worse than before. Alem, a young Ethiopian woman, who I met last month somewhere in Africa, said it best in her testimony last November. I am reading this to you so that you can understand the level of suffering under this regime.

Here is what Alem said: "On November 1, 2005, my mother was taken away from us. My father is one of those who had been elected to the Addis Ababa City Council. As we were seated at lunch, armed federal and security forces stormed the house. They started beating my father as they took him away. My mother walked behind them saying that he was a peaceful man, not deserving of this. She then took a hit with a club to the side of the chest, and as she turned away, she was shot in the same spot, and she fell. As she was struggling to get up, they shot her again. I ran towards her and they started to shoot at me. It is only by God's mercy that I escaped. As my own mother's eyes seemed to be pleading for help, while she was fighting for her life I was forced to run for mine and hid in a house in the neighborhood." The security man who killed her mother still has his job in Addis. The father was asked in prison to sign a paper saying my wife died of a heart attack. He told them I will not kill my wife twice. He spent more time in prison because of that. Not only this man lost his wife, but he also lost his daughter.

This is just one example, but there thousands like this. I am sure you have heard about the atrocities in the Ogaden, in Oromia, and Gambella. In fact the photographs you see in your folders are of two Ogaden women who were hanged and left for dead. You can see the scar on their necks. I guess these are the extremists and terrorists.

The close ties that this administration has forged with the Meles regime have been a source

of major concern. Even the State Department's human rights reports have documented abuses. Instead, we continued to provide military assistance to the government of Ethiopia, while failing to take a consistent outspoken stance in support of democracy and human rights at the highest levels of our government. Instead we have apologists for dictatorship.

The Ethiopian government has released a number of high profile political prisoners in recent months. And some people say this is progress. The fact remains that thousands of other people remain in jail, and no one has been held accountable for the deaths of nearly two hundred people in the wake of the 2005 elections. And repression of opposition politicians, journalists and members of civil society continues.

In April, the government of Ethiopia launched a major military campaign in the Ogaden, allegedly against the ONLF. Yet, the targets and victims have largely been civilian. Indeed, some see the Ethiopian campaign as retaliation for the attack by the ONLF, in which 77 people, mainly Ethiopian security personnel, were killed. But one must go back and look at the record carefully. The attack on the Ogaden did not start this year. In fact, the ONLF did join the current government in 1991 hoping to find a peaceful solution. In the 1992 regional elections, the ONLF won the majority of the seats. The ONLF left the government after the current government began to kill and arrest its leadership.

The Ethiopian military has been engaged in numerous human rights abuses against civilians in the Ogaden and Somalia, including killings, beatings, and rape. We will hear about them in detail from our witnesses today. The humanitarian situations in the Ogaden and in Somalia are dire as well. On September 13th, the United Nations Children's Fund warned that over 13,000 children in Somalia are so malnourished that they may die, while nearly 70,000 others suffer from malnutrition.

The situation is exacerbated by the Ethiopian government's military campaign in the Ogaden, the World Food Program's food deliveries were disrupted, the International Committee of the Red Cross was expelled and Doctors Without Borders has been denied permission to resume work in the area. Conditions have become so dire that Ogadenis are fleeing to neighboring Somalia in search of relief.

I strongly believe that the state of democracy in Ethiopia has a strong impact on what we are witnessing in Somalia and the Ogaden today. I hope during the course of this hearing, our witnesses will discuss their understanding of the current state of democracy in Ethiopia, as well as the human rights and humanitarian situation in the Ogaden.

The United States cannot afford to allow cooperation on the war on terror to prevent us from taking a principled stance on democracy and human rights issues.

I thank all of the witnesses for coming and turn now to the Ranking Member for his remarks. Mr. Smith.