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# Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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EVIDENCE

**Tuesday, April 27, 2010**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Dean Allison**



## Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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•(1135)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)):** Welcome to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are meeting with the Solidarity Committee for Ethiopian Political Prisoners—Canada.

I want to welcome Mr. Wendaferew and Mr. Workneh. Thank you very much for taking the time to be here today.

What we're going to do is start with an opening statement from you, Mr. Wendaferew, and then we'll have a chance to go around the room.

I apologize. We're a little late getting started, so we'll probably go to about half past twelve or so.

The floor is yours, sir. I will have you give us your short opening statement, and then we'll proceed around the room with some questions and answers.

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew (Chair, Solidarity Committee for Ethiopian Political Prisoners—Canada):** Wonderful. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank all of the members of Parliament and members of this committee for inviting us today to present our point of view pertaining to the upcoming election in Ethiopia and the situation of human and democratic rights in that country.

SOCEPP-Canada, which both of us represent, is a community-based human rights group advocating for respect of basic human and democratic rights in Ethiopia. In our opinion, in order to assess whether the upcoming election will be free and fair, one has to examine whether or not the internationally acceptable standards of democracy and human rights are respected in Ethiopia yesterday and today.

It's imperative to acknowledge that this planned election will take place in the aftermath of the 2005 election, in which thousands of citizens were detained and about 200 demonstrators were killed by government security forces following a peaceful demonstration. Nearly five years after that, nobody has been brought to justice. In fact, the members of the inquiry commission have been forced into exile, including the former Supreme Court judge of southern Ethiopia, Judge Frehiwot Samuel.

Since 2005, evidence has clearly shown that the repression has intensified in Ethiopia and the political space has narrowed extremely. The ruling political party, TPLF, has systematically

blocked all venues for free and fair elections in that country. The harassment, torture, and repression is massive. As documented by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Genocide Watch, the U.S. State Department's human rights report, and others, the repression in Ogaden, Gambella, Oromo, and other parts of the country is just massive.

Ethiopia continues to be the top jailer of journalists, even in 2009. In February 2010, in a letter addressed to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Joel Simpson, executive director of the international advocacy committee, CPJ, wrote, "according to our research, this makes Ethiopia the second worst jailer of the press in Sub-Saharan Africa." Eritrea jails the most.

In September 2009, again, a study by Open.Net Initiative, an internationally respected group, identifies Ethiopia as the only country in sub-Saharan Africa with "consistent" and "substantial" filtering of critical websites. The websites that have been blocked include CPJ's website.

Since 2005, in order to fully paralyze or disable the functioning of an independent civic society, the ruling party has passed three extremely Draconian laws. This includes the anti-terrorism proclamation, the charities and societies proclamation, and the mass media and freedom of information proclamation. The charities and societies proclamation prohibits any civic society that receives more than 10% of its income from foreign sources from participating in any advocacy work, be it human rights, women's rights, children's rights, elderly rights, language rights, or whatever. Absolutely, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the U.K.'s Article 19, CPJ, and many other human rights groups have condemned this legislation, but the government is still entrenched and continues with that.

As a result of this, in Ethiopia today, civic society has simply been decimated. A report issued about a month ago by Human Rights Watch entitled, *Ethiopia: Repression Rising Ahead of the May Elections*, summarizes the situation as follows:

"Expressing dissent is very dangerous in Ethiopia,".... "The ruling party and the state are becoming one, and the government is using the full weight of its power to eliminate opposition and intimidate people into silence. Government repression has caused many civil society activists and journalists to flee the country.... The most prominent independent newspaper was closed in December 2009 and the government jammed..."

—and the Prime Minister openly said this in an interview—

"...Voice of America radio broadcasts last month. Ethiopians are unable to speak freely, organize political activities, and challenge their government policies—whether through peaceful protests, voting, or publishing their views..."

This was what was said by Human Rights Watch.

The detention, harassment, and killing of opposition leaders and campaigners is widespread.

Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, the only female political party leader in the country's history, leader of the opposition and Unity for Democracy and Justice Party—UDJ—continues to suffer in jail and is denied the basic right of visits by friends and family, except for her four-year-old daughter and her elderly mother. Birtukan is in prison because in a meeting in Sweden she allegedly said that her release in 2007 from prison was a politically negotiated release, not an admission of guilt. Only because she said that is she now in prison for life.

Besides that, as the election gets closer, the repression is intensified. Recent reports, for example, show that the coalition candidate, Aregawi Gebre Yohanes, was killed in the province of Tigray. Only a few days ago another candidate was killed in central Ethiopia. On April 25, Professor Beyene Petros, the current chair of the opposition forum, citing the number of examples of intimidation and harassment, has reported widespread abuse by the government again.

The election commission in the country is impartial. It's filled with supporters and members of the ruling party. As Professor Petros said, the ruling party is a player and at the same time a referee. In such situations it's almost impossible to win an election. Therefore, it's imperative to fully accept that the upcoming election will be conducted under the most repressive environment, in the absence of basic conditions for free and fair elections. The signing of the code of conduct, which the government says is a big deal, is simply insufficient to make the election in any way free or fair. It was exclusionary and failed to address major issues, such as the release of political prisoners, the creation of an independent election commission, establishing the environment for free and fair elections, freedom of the press, and others.

The most disturbing aspect that's developing now is that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's statement characterizes the opposition as surrogates of the Eritrean government and allies of that regime. He has stated very clearly that the government is now gathering evidence of wrongdoing by the opposition party leaders. These are clear notices that the ruling party wants to attack the opposition and throw them in jail should they threaten their power, as they did in 2005. This should not be tolerated. The international community should put the rulers on notice and clearly tell them that such behaviour and violence against the opposition and public will not be tolerated.

As reported by ICG, the International Crisis Group, in September of 2009, while the EPRDF promises democracy, it has not accepted the fact that the opposition is qualified to take power via the ballot box, and it tends to regard the expression of differing views and interests as a form of betrayal. Hence, we are very concerned that the planned election will only be a mockery and contribute to further deterioration of rights. The popular aspiration for human rights and democracy and the continued narrowing of the political space are completely incompatible. We are concerned that such frustrating situations could undermine the peace and stability of the country and lead to the abandonment of peaceful political activity. This will not be in the interests of Ethiopia, the neighbouring countries, and the international community.

We believe this unmitigated support by the international community to the government of Meles Zenawi is a recipe for growing instability in Ethiopia and in the region at large. Hence, we recommend that the following measures be taken:

Canada must strongly condemn the repression of human and democratic rights in Ethiopia and demand a full respect of such rights. It must break its silence and condemn the ongoing repression and climate of fear in Ethiopia, as suggested by Human Rights Watch.

Canada must join the people of Ethiopia and other human rights organizations in demanding the release of political prisoners, including Birtukan Mideksa and others.

● (1140)

Canada must use its considerable financial leverage to end the harassment of the opposition and the repressive laws that are crippling civil society in that country.

Canada should investigate whether its aid has been misused for political purposes, including the buying of votes. There are numerous reports pertaining to those kinds of things. Send a substantial number—a substantial number—of independent election observers to be placed in strategic locations or districts in consultation with the opposition. Take into account the pre-election repression when assessing the freedom and fairness of the polls. Another option could be to consider sending a bipartisan parliamentary committee to assess the situation. The commission will have to give a blunt assessment of the facts on the ground.

Canada must take the initiative and work, in our opinion, with all donor countries to put pressure on the incumbent regime to negotiate in good faith with all opposition groups and parties to pave the way for an all-inclusive national reconciliation, sustainable change, and democratization in Ethiopia.

We think it's time really to begin to think about post-election at this point. Canada should consider, in our opinion, the suspension of non-emergency aid and/or targeted sanctions should the ruling group in Ethiopia refuse to hear the call for respect of rights and democratization.

Thank you very much.

● (1145)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Wendaferew.

We're now going to start with Mr. Rae.

**Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.):** Thank you very much.

I'd like to welcome you. I appreciate the chance to ask you some questions.

The question that always occurs to me in discussions like this is, how do you explain the extent of western support? It's not just Canada we're talking about. We're talking about U.S. aid, DFID, and German aid. A number of western governments have all decided to put a great deal of emphasis on their support for the Government of Ethiopia. Yet we hear such a contradictory account. If I may say so, it's not just from you.

I'll just say to members that I would be happy to share an article that appeared in the *The New York Review of Books* this week called "Cruel Ethiopia", which is further documentation of the circumstances in the country at the moment.

I wondered if I could get from you gentlemen your explanation as to why there's such a contradiction between the apparent repression in Ethiopia and yet the really massive amounts of foreign assistance the country has received—in the billions—over the last several years.

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** Thank you very much.

I think it's a very interesting situation that's developing in Ethiopia. Ethiopia suffered huge repression under Mengistu Haile Mariam, the previous military ruler. At that point, of course, Mengistu and his government proclaimed that they were socialists and they were backed by Cuba, Russia, and things like that. Therefore, there was this dichotomy: "We want to overthrow or get rid of the communist regime." When Meles came to power, he clearly said that he would accept the principles of human rights, he would accept multi-party politics, and all the good things that a pluralized society would aspire to. Therefore, there was this honeymoon, I would say, for a period of time, and the desire to give him an opportunity to see if things would be improved.

Also, in practical terms, I have to admit at the beginning of this government's taking power there were some indications of positive things. For example, there were a number of independent newspapers; there were political parties that started to organize; there was a semblance of a democratic and progressive movement that came up. Therefore, in my opinion, the west started really to foster this positive aspect, thinking that capitalizing on the gains would push the government further into democratization. That was the beginning.

Secondly, I would say, particularly in the last little while, since 9/11, regional stability and terrorism have been an issue. Of course, Meles says that he is an ally of the western world, particularly the United States. He went to Somalia, for example, and assisted a lot. But there are a lot of factors that we really have to consider when we talk about these things.

First of all, in terms of democracy, as I said, at the beginning there was a semblance, but since then the movement has been backsliding continuously. The free press is already decimated.

In terms of regional stability, I would say within the Ethiopian opposition, the main opposition, there is full understanding and acceptance that any form of religious extremism should not be allowed to flourish in Ethiopia. Even if you examine each of the opposition groups, you'll see that they all condemn extremism. They all want to continue to foster a democratic process, a multi-party system, pluralism in the country.

I would say it's just a combination of all of these factors that has really played into the hands of the government. I think they have also been smart in playing a game in lots of places. Particularly, they have a very strong PR that really helps them to get their message out, and deceive, I would say, a lot of the western countries.

● (1150)

**Hon. Bob Rae:** The particular dilemma we face if we were to cut off aid or try to use aid as a means of pressure...there are two problems. One is obviously the humanitarian problem. The second problem is that we've discovered that in the world today we don't have a monopoly on aid. So if we're not present and we decide to pull away, and other western countries decide to pull away, there are a couple of other big countries that will just fill the gap.

One of the dilemmas we have in trying to use leverage is that we're not living in a unipolar world. We're not living in a world where we're the only ones. We're not the only game in town. This is the dilemma we have in Africa right now. We don't have the leverage.

There used to be a competition with the Russians in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. Now there's a competition with the Chinese. We have to recognize that as a strategic problem for us as we go forward. Simply abandoning the field to the Chinese is a question we have to understand as a dilemma in how we use our leverage to get a better result.

We all want to get a better result. The problem is how we can achieve that. We all believe that promoting democracy is a legitimate thing to do, and arguing for human rights is a legitimate part of our foreign policy—a very important part of our foreign policy. The dilemma always is, how do you do it effectively when we're not living in a world where we're the only ones who can control the outcome?

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** That's right, Mr. Rae. I think it's a big concern how China is really emerging throughout Africa. The development in terms of the relationship between Meles and China is worrisome, to say the least, because a repression would intensify.... It's worrisome because China will start to say, "It doesn't matter. Whatever you want, just do it, as long as you give me access to a few things here and there."

Having said that, it's very clear that 40% to 60% of the current government's budget is subsidized by the western world; therefore, we can have a big influence—maybe not pull out completely, as suggested. It could be a strategic approach. It could be very selective. We could use that leverage to pressure the government to show tangible, measurable results in human rights development, pluralism, and those kinds of things. Calling for reconciliation and laying the groundwork for sustained change is possible.

The government is absolutely susceptible to the influence of the western world. Canada's voice—they very clearly listen. We can influence them; there's huge leverage. The force of other western powers, including the United States and Europe—absolutely. If the western world starts to push, I am sure a lot of change can be initiated. I'm hoping that will create momentum within the country and the organization itself that will prepare the government and the parties to move toward further democratization.

There's a lot we can do. With 40% to 60%, as I said...the power of the western world. You can imagine. I'm sure China will slowly creep and start to support, but I don't think they are in a position to provide 40% or 60% of Ethiopia's budget at this point.

•(1155)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Rae.

We'll now go to Madame Deschamps.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ):** You will forgive me for not trying to pronounce your names. I will simply refer to you as gentlemen. Let me just say I am pleased to meet you today. You have already begun your testimony, so perhaps you touched on this matter earlier, but I would like to go back to what Human Rights Watch said in one of its reports.

The organization mentioned that the Ethiopian government was planning a coordinated and sustained attack against its political opponents, journalists and human rights advocates. The Ethiopian government was probably responding to concerns voiced by external groups when it put in place an electoral body and gave it the mandate to crack down on election offences and fraud.

With the May 2010 election looming, do you think that the above-mentioned mechanism is legitimate? Is its goal to quell the criticism coming from outside of the country? Is it an initiative designed to restore the government's image?

[*English*]

**Mr. Akilu Wendaferew:** Thank you very much.

You can just pronounce my name as is. It's phonetic, so you just pronounce it as it is written. If you say Akilu, that should be good enough.

In terms of the Human Rights Watch report, that's one of the reports I quoted earlier. Georgette Gagnon, a Canadian who is now heading the Human Rights Watch Africa desk, was the one who really, clearly, activated this. Yes, you're right, and they were right, absolutely. The government was planning a coordinated attack on journalists, the media, and human rights advocates. That's what they said. Yes, they did it.

In December, four reporters from the most popular journal, *Addis Neger*, were forced to leave the country. That's what happened. Yes, they did it. They banned. They jammed. In an interview, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia said openly, "Yes, I'm jamming; I'm looking at my technical capacity to see whether I can jam the Voice of America or not." That's what he said. Then subsequently he jammed it. VOA has to transmit its program—you can go and research this, it's available now—through a satellite program to overcome the jamming. Yes, they are attacking the media.

In terms of other things that I have articulated, they have passed three laws in the last few years to absolutely decimate civic society. The charities and societies act, which I talked about, is one of the cruellest rules they have implemented. It prohibits any non-government organization that receives more than 10% of its budget.... It says you cannot advocate about anything: human rights, women's rights, language rights, or anything else. Imagine Ethiopia, where the population is so poor. And civic societies, where do they get their budgets? From foreign aid, from CIDA, from USAID, and things like that.... They're telling them, if you get this thing, you can't

advocate. What does that mean? Basically, it cripples them. With no reserves, you will die. That's what they did.

Again, the government says yes, they have formed some committee to look into complaints. This is all window dressing. Again, as I said, the opposition has not fully participated in that process. As I said, that is part of what they call a code of conduct. It's exclusionary. Only two parties participated. The major opposition, called "the forum", a coalition of eight political parties, has been excluded completely. They did not take part in that one. Why? Because the coalition said, we can't just talk about a code of conduct; we should talk about the bigger picture.

What does the code of conduct have in it? I'll just give you a couple of examples. It says freedom of the press has to be respected. There should be no harassment. There should be this. There should be none of that.

Ethiopia does not lack rules. Ethiopia does not lack legislation.

Mr. Rae asked me, why is no one supporting it? Because it promised in its own constitution that it will respect human rights; it will respect all of this. That was in 1991 and 1993, but they have been eroding it. What do they do today as part of the code of ethics? They repeat the same thing. They say they'll respect freedom of opinion, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press. What does that mean? The proof is in the pudding, they say. Where is that? What is the proof here? It's nowhere to be seen.

•(1200)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ):** You talked about the need to avoid measures that reflect religious extremism. I know that there are Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia. Who is responsible for the extremism we are currently seeing?

[*English*]

**Mr. Akilu Wendaferew:** No. Religious extremism is a completely different thing, in my opinion. The government tries to use extremism to suppress rights. For example, in Ogaden, most of the people are Somalis and Muslims. The government talks about terrorism and all kinds of things in connection with Somalis, and there is all kinds of repression. Human Rights Watch has issued a statement about that. That is the government's interpretation of things.

What I am talking about is, within the Ethiopian opposition, as far as I see it, there's a sense of pluralism. There's a sense of acceptance of diversity, including religious rights. At the same time, there's a clear understanding that society should not be dominated by a single religious extreme idea, where a religious political party would be the rule of the game. So that's what I was referring to.

**The Chair:** That's all the time we have.

We're going to move to Mr. Obhrai for seven minutes.

**Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for coming, gentlemen.

Of course, I've been to Ethiopia three times. I know very well firsthand about the situation in Ethiopia that you have described and the concern the government has. I want to lay out the facts on what the Government of Canada has been doing and its concerns on this issue.

First and foremost, to my colleague over here, when talking about development aid, Canada does not directly support the Government of Ethiopia. Canadian aid goes through multilaterally and bilaterally. It goes through NGOs and international institutions to help with food security and things that are of critical importance to the people of Ethiopia. I have personally visited, and I know how important this program is to alleviate the famine that's taking place.

As you know, Prime Minister Meles is the chair of NEPAD. Ethiopia agreed to go in front of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. At that time, Canada proposed certain things for Ethiopia, half of which Ethiopia accepted. Ethiopia did not accept the other half. One that they accepted, which we hope works, is the national action plan on human rights. They agreed to the plan. They also said they would put appropriate mechanisms in place to address concerns that may arise from the 2010 elections. We'll wait to see what those will be.

Regretfully, the concern Canada has is on human rights and democracy in reference to the opposition's continued detention of Madam Birtukan Mideksa. The Government of Ethiopia did not accept our criticism that the democratic space in Ethiopia is shrinking. We remain concerned about these things in Ethiopia, including the continued detention of Madam Mideksa. Canada has called for her to be released. Along with our international partners, we've kept it a strong and continuing issue as to where and how improvements will take place.

We remain concerned about the elections. At this stage, along with other international partners, Canada is thinking about sending electoral observers for the 2010 election to see that it's a fair and a free election. We continue in our engagement to raise these concerns with the Government of Ethiopia. You've pointed it out and human rights commissions have pointed it out.

The question raised by Mr. Rae is this: Why do we continue an engagement with Ethiopia?

Ethiopia remains a central part of Africa. The AU is there, and a lot of international issues arise from there. Of most importance is the engagement regarding the massive famine that took place. I was there and I saw how CIDA worked to reduce the potential for famine in that country.

It does not take away the fact you have outlined. I want to thank you for coming here to highlight that. It doesn't take away the fact of the concern of the international community. We will continue to put pressure on the Government of Ethiopia. Through you coming in front of the committee, public pressure is being put on Ethiopia to continue to open up space for democratic development.

Recently, aside from my visit, the Minister of Foreign Affairs also met with Prime Minister Meles and the foreign minister when we were there for the African Union meeting.

●(1205)

That remains of concern to the Government of Canada, and I just want to put that on the record. We'll continue pushing on that.

I can't say anything else, and you can't tell me anything else that we do not know, but just to say, this is where we'll be heading now.

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** Thank you. I really have to say, we've enjoyed bipartisan support around the Parliament of Canada.

In 2005, when we had the massive killing of demonstrators and the continued unrest, the foreign affairs critic then, Mr. Stockwell Day, issued about five or six statements. In one of his statements he clearly said that the gravity to the Government of Ethiopia has to stop. Something has to be done. The human rights abuses cannot continue. They cannot continue to expect Canada's aid if they continue to abuse the human rights of their own people.

Very honestly, we're just saying that we have to look into those options. How? It has to be thought out very carefully, but I think Canada has big leverage. Canada can do more, very honestly.

It's doing great. Ethiopians of Canadian origin are appreciative of what Canada has done throughout its history for Ethiopia, whether in regard to famine, development, promotion of democracy, or other things. But Canada can do more. Canada is powerful, and as a strong power it can do quite a bit when it comes to Ethiopia. It can influence.

I'm not sure about the election observers. We met with the staff at Foreign Affairs a few weeks ago and we were notified about that development, but we're not sure how many delegates or members of the observing team will be sent from Canada. Will it be substantially enough? There are about 40,000 election spots, and how many of them are going to be covered by Canada is a big concern. If it's going to be really very minute, maybe three or four or five, would that make any difference? That's something of concern for us.

The other thing I would raise is that I understand they might go, as already suggested, with other countries, but Canada also has a substantial investment. So would it be a good idea for Canada to have its own delegation so that it has its own voice? It's something about which we have spoken to the people at Foreign Affairs. The other thing, again, as I suggested, is that it's good that Canada is starting to get involved in that respect too, but it has to go beyond that.

In terms of Meles' promise to make some changes, again, as I said, there has to be accountability. It has to be measurable, and it has to be a really clear target, as far as I see it. Otherwise he promises, but reneges on his promises from year to year. This has happened many, many times, and there's no reason to believe that what he has promised now will be implemented. In fact, he says he will try to do something in terms of the problems that could arise after the 2010 election. Well, there is a problem right now. He is killing people. He is killing candidates. He is arresting them.

I have a list, and I can tell you, throughout the country there have been about 11 places in the last two or three weeks alone where people have been forced to pull back their candidacy because they're told, "If you continue to do that, you're going to lose your job; that's it, you're out." Their families are harassed. In some places, people are killed. In central Ethiopia, as I said, a person was killed. In other places, people are attacked. This is happening.

So he may promise what will come tomorrow, but today shows us a completely different thing.

It's great that Canada is engaged, but I think we need to be more assertive, more vocal, and push a little bit further to make a change.

Thank you.

●(1210)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Dewar, sir, you have seven minutes.

**Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our guests for being here.

I want to pick up on a comment that Mr. Rae made—and I share his thoughts—about the difficulty in reviewing aid. To clarify, I don't think you were saying we should withdraw aid, but certainly we should ensure that the aid is not benefiting the regime. I note—and it's been since 2005, according to my notes here—that there has been suspension of direct aid to the government. But my understanding, from you and others, is that there are other ways for the aid to get to the regime so that it can benefit. I think everyone around this table shares the concern that the regime could benefit from the aid we're sending, but by the same token, everyone is concerned that we still want to help the people who need the help. The general thrust is that we all want to support that. I'd just like you to comment on that.

The other thing I want to touch on is that the government has said it's looking at observers for the elections. I just want to know if there have been any diplomatic notes or missives sent regarding the jailing of the opposition leader.

As well, has our government expressed to the Ethiopian government—and maybe the parliamentary secretary can address this—any concerns around the recent civil society organizations' charities and societies proclamation, which is really retrograde? For those who don't know—and you've already mentioned it—to put a limit of 10% on external financial support to organizations to function in Ethiopia is basically just killing all NGOs that are doing human rights work. Think of Human Rights Watch or Amnesty. They can't go around and raise funds amongst the Ethiopian people. That's just not happening. This is a really retrograde, regressive law, and I'm just wondering if our government has spoken out on the jailing of the opposition leader and on this law, which has really stifled any kind of NGO or third-party voice,

So there are those three things: the issue of aid, the comments from our government regarding the jailing of the opposition leader, and the question of whether our government has spoken out on the charities and societies proclamation, to your knowledge. Maybe Mr. Obhrai can help us there.

●(1215)

**The Chair:** Mr. Obhrai, go ahead.

**Mr. Deepak Obhrai:** During my meetings with President Meles, I raised the issue of the charities and expressed our concern. I said we had a problem with that charities issue. During the human rights commission...we raised that issue again, and regrettably Ethiopia did not accept that. But, yes, we have expressed quite a serious concern in reference to that issue.

In a similar manner, Canada has spoken out with concern about the jailing of the opposition leader, and we have asked that the leader be released. We have done that.

**The Chair:** Please go ahead.

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** I heard the statements also in Geneva a couple of months ago. There was mention of the repressive law and a demand for its repeal.

I guess you know the aid issue is a very difficult situation. I'm not saying it should be completely pulled out. I know Ethiopia needs a lot, but it really has to be looked at very carefully. There are a number of reports that show, and even the human rights report has indicated.... It didn't say Canadian aid, but overall aid money was used to buy political votes and manipulation and similar things.

In fact, if we go a little bit further, there's a BBC report that came out about a month ago that shows that even in 1984-85, the aid money that was sent to northern Ethiopia, when these people were rebels, had been used to strengthen their military wing. This comes from the top brass of the government, people who are in the political party itself.

So there is serious concern about whether our aid, our country's taxpayers' money, is being manipulated or not. I'm not sure. I think there is a good monetary mechanism, but is any of that being manipulated by the government? I can't comment on that. I think there has to be some monitoring.

When we met a couple of weeks ago with the people at CIDA we raised this issue. They said that since the news report a few months ago, they have been talking to other partners and investigating whether this thing is happening or not. But there's no open investigation. I'm not really sure where things are at this point. I'm sure all of you will follow up on that and make sure that Canada's aid is going where it is meant to go.

It's very interesting. Meles said, as you said, that he's going to work through some of the recommendations—through the Human Rights Commission and things like that. I say that because I heard it also from CIDA, the ombudsman's office, and the Ethiopian human rights organization.



Honestly, this is something that you may really have to think about very closely. I know both of these groups are part of the government. The so-called Human Rights Commission of Ethiopia, which is supported by a lot of western powers.... When all of these people were killed, 200 killed in 2005 and thousands—about 40,000 to 50,000—jailed, when all of this was happening, it didn't even issue a single press release condemning human rights abuses in the country. Nothing. But it calls itself the human rights commission and gets all kinds of support from all over the world. That's something to think about.

• (1220)

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Are you referring to the Human Rights Council?

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** No, it's not the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, which is independent; it's almost getting paralyzed. There is another group called the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission that's working under the government.

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Okay, so it's within the country. All right.

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** Yes.

There is also the ombudsman's office, which is also getting all kinds of things. I understand Meles has said he will carry these reforms through the ombudsman's office and things like that. Very honestly, that's another joke.

Ethiopian civil servants are being politicized now. If you graduate from university in Ethiopia, the government will ask if you want to work for them. If yes, then you sign to be a member of the ruling party. You have to. If you don't, you don't get a job. You're sitting in the office of some of the bureaucrats, they will come to you and tell you....

I'll give you an example. One of the persons I just received in western Ethiopia in a place called Mattu was a candidate for one of the oppositions. She works in one of the commercial banks. What do they do? They talk to her and say, "You want to compete? You want to continue with this? You will lose your job." So you decide to pull out, or continue and lose your job. This is the kind of thing that's happening.

The ombudsman's office hasn't even issued a single statement, one line, to condemn this kind of interference by the government. So in my opinion, if you strengthen them, what you are doing is strengthening the government itself, strengthening the repression itself. It is good to build capacity, it is good to build institutions, but not the government's capacity, not repressive institutions. It has to be the other way around. Civic society, independent groups—that's where we have to invest, in my opinion.

**Mr. Paul Dewar:** Could I just make a comment?

I know the government is listening. Every embassy does a report on human rights in the country, and if they haven't done so in Addis—maybe they have. To evaluate the capacity and what we've just heard today in terms of a human rights commission that somehow isn't able to identify the jailing of tens of thousands of people or the disappearance of journalists or an ombudsman who seemingly doesn't follow up, I would hope that—and this is a public hearing—the embassy would actually take note, if they haven't done so already, because clearly we don't want to be supporting that kind of process if it's not effective.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** We'll finish up with Mr. Lunney.

**Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC):** Thank you.

My first question was actually replied to. I think Mr. Van Kesteren had a question, Mr. Chair.

My first question was to do with aid and some of the confusion about the change in the law. I'm wondering whether that had anything to do with our redirecting our aid through NGOs like the UN and some of our Canadian NGOs. I think you've already addressed that fairly substantially. I'm not sure you'd have more to answer on that.

I wanted to ask two things. One, I think you said there were 200 killed in 2005 and I think you mentioned—if I got the number right—40,000 to 50,000 jailed. Was that in 2005 or is that current?

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** That was in 2005. The current number of political prisoners is in the thousands—thousands.

**Mr. James Lunney:** There's some concern about Ethiopians even in Canada. Right now I think there have been a number of murders in the community. Did I read that correctly? In Alberta?

• (1225)

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** Those are Somalians.

**Mr. James Lunney:** Somalians. Excuse me for confusing your neighbours.

Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew—if I'm saying that right—thank you. You've informed us significantly on this particular challenge, some of us who are not as adept as some of our colleagues on all of the intrigues in your neighbourhood.

Is there concern in the Ethiopian community in Canada about speaking out, and are you putting yourself at risk? Are you concerned about that? Could you tell us a little about yourself? My information here doesn't tell me much about you and your story.

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** Yes, there is a risk. Am I putting myself at risk? Yes, I am. Yet I know someone has to take risks to secure freedom. That has to be done. I promised myself when I came to this country 23 years ago that I would continue to do that regardless of the consequences.

I came to Canada in 1988, just to tell you, because you asked me to tell you a little about myself. I came as a young person. At that time young people were being harassed left and right in Ethiopia. It was very difficult for a young person to think independently. Our neighbours, our friends, and schoolmates were being killed all over. That time was called the Red Terror in Ethiopia, one of the worst times in the history of our country.

I left shortly after that and I said, no, I can't live under these conditions. I went to Sudan as a refugee and then came to Canada, sponsored by the government as a landed immigrant. I'm very grateful. I'm highly appreciative of my new country. Since I came here I've been very blessed with a lot of things.

I went to university and finished my first degree at the University of Western Ontario in social work. Then I went further and did my master's in social work at the University of Toronto. Then I studied again, additional postgraduate ethnic and pluralism studies. I did another certificate in non-profit management at the Schulich School of Business. Since then I have been practising social work. I've been a social worker, a family counsellor, a program manager, and a number of things. Now I'm assistant executive director of one of the social service agencies in downtown Toronto, Good Shepherd Ministries, working with the homeless and disadvantaged people here in our homeland, Canada. I have been active in human rights advocacy because that is the value that drove me out of Ethiopia and that's the value that I cherish here in Canada.

Am I risking myself? Yes, I am, absolutely. I know that. It is a heavy risk. There is a possibility they will find an excuse to jail one of my brothers or sisters who are still in Ethiopia. That may happen. It's very likely. But so be it. Someone has to pay, and people are paying a price. I cannot be intimidated by a brutal government in Ethiopia when I'm living in a free country like Canada. That's why I'm speaking out very honestly. This is it, because I have the luxury of living in Canada in a democratic society and I should not be intimidated by some repressive regime back in Ethiopia. That would be against my personal ethics and it would be a disaster if I was to do that. That's why I'm doing this. There are very serious risks.

**Mr. James Lunney:** I'm sure the chair will thank you, but I would like to express my appreciation for your testimony. It's been very helpful.

• (1230)

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** Thank you, sir.

**The Chair:** Do you have a question, Mr. Van Kesteren?

**Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming. You have a fascinating history. I don't know much about it, but I do know it's an ancient history and you have suffered greatly with European oppression. I think the Italians took away the ancient regime. From that, you've moved on. You talked about the Red Terror.

I'm curious. We mentioned today the influence of China. Of course, the Soviet Union is no longer in existence. The west obviously understands the importance of the geography of your position. You're surrounded by Muslim neighbours.

I get a lot of my information, strangely enough, from my taxi drivers. There are a number of Ethiopian taxi drivers, immigrants here, who shuttle us back and forth to the airport. In one of my conversations, I asked about life in Ethiopia and what's happening. There is some stability. They talk about some of the things you're talking about, but they also mention that there seems to be a role or an influence that is starting to come from Saudi Arabia. You've mentioned the other powers. We all know that there is another war going on, and it's not often talked about. I wonder if you would comment on that. One of the things he said, which was interesting, was that many Saudis, or those who are influenced by the Saudi Arabians, are marrying a lot of the young women because they are allowed larger groups in marriage, and that there seems to be a shift

taking place from a traditionally Christian country to a Muslim country.

Is there, in essence, another war that's going on too? Tell us a little bit about the influence that Saudi Arabia has and the pressures the country is feeling as a result.

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** Maybe my friend can help me.

Thank you for articulating some of the history. There is a lot of good history in the country and with the people, just as there is in any other country, very honestly. There are very good things, so we have to acknowledge that. At the same time, concerning the Muslim-Christian diversity within Ethiopia, the country has been very much a blessed country with diversity, and for centuries Muslims and Christians have lived side by side in peace. In fact, there are a substantial number of Jews also within the Ethiopian community, and we have lived together very much in harmony.

Yes, there has been systemic repression, systemic discrimination from time to time. I acknowledge that, but that fabric of unity, of oneness, of togetherness is amazing. It is so mixed. You will find a family that has a Christian father, a Muslim mother, and offspring of a Christian father and a Muslim mother. It is very much mixed in our country.

In the last little while, politically—

**Mr. Dave Van Kesteren:** I'm sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to say that nature hates a vacuum. There has been so much turmoil, and I think that in Ethiopia today there definitely is a vacuum as to what is traditional. I agree with your...but you know better than I do how you've managed traditionally, and you've managed very well with those three.

We talked about China. We talked about pressures. Are you feeling any pressure from the Saudis? Is there anything?

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** Very honestly, I don't want to mislead this committee in any way. I'm not very versed with that, but I would say there's a lot of going back and forth. I have read some articles about Wahabism and things like that, the possible spread of Islam in that part of the world and fundamentalism and those kinds of things. But one thing I really want to say again and again is that within the political system, within the political parties, there is so much diversity.

In fact, very honestly, if you look at the opposition and the governing party, you'll see more diversity, more possibility for stability within the opposition. The opposition has people from all over the country, from all ethnic groups, including Meles' own region, Tigray. For example, his own defence minister in the past, Seye, is now part of the leadership of the opposition. The former president of the country has abandoned him and is now a member of the opposition. The former governor of the province of Tigray, where Meles came from, has now abandoned them and has come to the opposition.

There is much diversity within the opposition, religious and otherwise, so the opposition can continue to create stability within the country, I would say.

**The Chair:** I'll just wrap it up here. It was a "short" question—but it wasn't short.

**Mr. Solomon Workneh (As an Individual):** Yes, anything that involves religion can never be short.

Actually, there is a trend of fundamentalism developing. It's an international trend; it's not just an Ethiopian phenomenon, but it is all over. Muslims everywhere have tried to harden their positions. That is also reflected in Ethiopia.

When I grew up, I didn't see Muslim women covering their heads. Now it is the thing to do for Muslim women. It's a general trend, the way I see it. But Saudi Arabia does play a role, in the sense of encouraging the Muslim population to assert itself, possibly. This is what makes it a little more different from the past. Mosques are being built everywhere in major Ethiopian cities. There were mosques in the past, but not as many as there are now.

However, the population is pretty well integrated with each other; Christians, Muslims, and even the very few Jews live together really. There is much more cooperation and much more integration in the population.

Article 29 of the constitution of this regime allows any ethnic group to secede. This regime cursed the flag that Ethiopians grew up

with, but people are supporting each other and are sitting strong. Really, nobody ever makes a claim to secede.

Of course, there is the Ogaden movement and the Oromo movement. If you were to handle it politically, these movements could be pacified and could become good players in society. But the lack of democracy in the current system is causing much to be astir, and would even in the most established societies, I imagine.

Thank you for asking.

• (1235)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I want to thank you, Mr. Workneh, as well as Mr. Wendaferew, for being here today. We really appreciate your insights into what's happening in Ethiopia.

Thank you very much.

**Mr. Aklilu Wendaferew:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** The meeting is adjourned.

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