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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 4

### Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

## **Written statement\* submitted by Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 August 2020]


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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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## **Ethiopia: Reformist Government fails to bring in changes, abusive culture of impunity persists**

### **Executive Summary**

This submission primarily focuses on the situation of human rights in Ethiopia over the past two years.

There continue to be continuing arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, and communication blackouts. Political dissent from supporters, members and officials of opposition parties are major targets of these violations. Journalists and private media are also targeted. There has also been a failure to ensure accountability for past gross human rights violations as an underlying factor threatening the future of human rights in the country.

Years of bitter grievances from Ethiopian people led to a public protest in May 2014 in Oromia that later expanded to the Amhara region and other places. The excessive force used by government security forces left thousands of people dead or severely injured. From the protests emerged a reformist faction - the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a ruling party since 1991. The reform initiative finally culminated in the appointment of Dr. Abiy Ahmed on April 2, 2018 as prime minister (PM) to lead the government for the remaining term.

In his first few months in office, PM Abiy Ahmed took remarkable measures in addressing long standing political and legal issues of the country. Among others, thousands of prisoners of conscience were released; notorious detention and torture chambers like Maikelawi prison were closed; and a series of legal, justice and institutional reforms were launched. All political parties once banned and operating in exile were invited home to operate peacefully. The PM has also resolved decades of stalemate situations between Ethiopia and Eritrea; this allowed him to win the Nobel Peace Prize of 2019. However, these positive developments, loudly welcomed in the first few months of PM Abiy's reign, were not sustained.

Most parts of the country where a suspected former military wing of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was allegedly operating have been administered under the unofficial State of Emergency, literally called "Command Post" for the past one half year. Western and Southern zones of Oromia region as well as Western and Central parts of Amhara region Chilga woreda in Semien Gondar Zone are areas where an unlawful Command Post has been boldly operating until recently legitimized by a nationwide State of Emergency declared to control the spread of Covid-19.

This submission addresses threatening human rights situations in Ethiopia with an emphasis on gross violations of human rights committed most recently.

### **Lack of Accountability and Impunity for Past Human Rights Abuses**

In his inaugural speech held on April 02, 2018, PM Abiy Ahmed (Dr.) publicly acknowledged and apologized for the gross violations of human rights since 1991. Back on November 2018, about 60 top officials were arrested and accused of committing gross human rights violations and crimes of organized corruption. Getachew Assefa, chief of the National Intelligence Service and Security (NISS) and allegedly a mastermind of past human rights abuses, was accused in absentia. The police failed to arrest him. None of the officials accused have been convicted to date and the Attorney General has discontinued prosecution against some of the officials, a measure claimed as "widening a political space".<sup>1</sup> Once more, government efforts to hold perpetrators to account of crimes and violations remain unaddressed and remain without remedy.

This is a clear manifestation of encouraging impunity for gross human rights violations such as extrajudicial killings of thousands of people in the public protests between 2014 and 2018

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<sup>1</sup> Ethiopian News Agency, 'Government Drops Charges against 63 Individuals' (February 25, 2020) <https://www.ena.et/en/?author=ihpsnygmpxa&paged=56>.

alone. The government neither made an effort to establish an independent inquiry commission nor invited international experts to conduct an investigation of gross human rights violations of the past. The fate of hundreds of victims of enforced disappearances,<sup>2</sup> especially since 1991 including the two senior officials of OLF namely Nadhi Gemeda and Bekele Dawano, is not yet resolved.

### **Extrajudicial Killings**

The killings of civilians by government security forces have been rampant in the past two years. On April 09, 2018, just a few days after PM Abiy Ahmed (Dr) took office, the Federal Military ruthlessly killed a woman named Ayantu Mohammed in East Hararge, Kobo town. Ayantu was six-months pregnant according to an interview her sister gave on Voice of America Amharic service on April 10, 2018. Violence has continued ever since. The research that Amnesty International (AI) released on May 29, 2020<sup>3</sup> clearly depicts widespread killings of civilians in Southern Oromia especially in East and West Guji zones as well as in Western and Central zones of Amhara region. Similar brutal killings mentioned in the report are also common in other places. The murders of dozens of students mostly in universities found in Amhara region remain un-redressed. The killings of Mohammad Amin on May 14, 2020 in Eastern Hararge and Amsalu Gudeta, a mother of four, on May 21, 2020 in Western Wellega, Lalo Assabi district were among the most recent Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa's (HRLHA) reports which document the continuing atrocities in Ethiopia.

### **Harassment of Opposition members and Political Dissent**

The Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa (HRLHA) and the other international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented the arbitrary detentions, mass arrests, torture and ill-treatments by the security in Ethiopia. Thousands of supporters, members and top officials of opposition parties have been extra judicially arrested and are now languishing in various known, and secret, detention centers for several months without charge. The more notable national parties namely the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and the National Movement of Amhara (NAMA) are the main targets of harassment.

For instance, dozens of senior officials of the OLF were arbitrarily arrested and the whereabouts of some of them is yet unknown. Some senior members of the party including Kayo Fufa, Dandi Gabroshe, Efreem Geleta, Mo'a Abdisa, Tariku Abdisa, Bayana Ruda (Professor), Aliyi Yusuf, Abdi Ragassa, Batire File, Gada Gabisa, Blisumma Ararsa, Olika Chali have been in detention for the last eight months and charged under the repealed Anti-Terrorism Proclamation No.652/2009, which is still in effect. The fate of Abdi Ragassa, a member of the Executive Committee of OLF, is unknown since his arrest on February 29, 2020<sup>4</sup> though eight other officials arrested with him were released a few days later. Similarly, Aman File and Gada Gabisa, members of the Central Committee of the Organization, were also arbitrarily arrested on March 7, 2020 and their whereabouts remain undisclosed by the government.

<sup>2</sup> There are 113 outstanding cases of enforced disappearance not yet resolved according to the 2019 Report of the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (July 30, 2019), <https://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/7992514.65797424.html> pp. 11 and 25.

<sup>3</sup> AI, Ethiopia: "'Beyond Law Enforcement': Human Rights Violations By Ethiopian Security Forces in Amhara and Oromia" (May 29, 2020) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/2358/2020/en/>.

<sup>4</sup> AI, 'Ethiopia: Police Must Account for Missing Oromo Opposition Leader' (March 03, 2020) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/ethiopia-police-must-account-for-missing-oromo-opposition-leader/>.

## Communication Blackouts and Detention of Journalists

The government of Ethiopia has perpetrated frequent mobile and internet service shutdowns in the past years. A recent incident was that of the total communication blackouts in the Western parts of Oromia for several months under a pretext of a military operation against the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), former military wing of OLF, widely operating in these areas.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the arbitrary detentions of journalists have been frequently witnessed in recent times. For instance, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), activist-journalist Yazew Kebede has been in detention since October 28, 2019; and journalists of Voice of Oromo Youth for Freedom, Adugna Kesso and Gada Bulti have been in detention since October 03, 2019.<sup>6</sup> Dasu Dula, journalist and assistant director of the Oromia News Network (ONN); and Wako Nole, journalist at Voice of Oromo Liberation, were also arbitrarily arrested on March 07, 2020 and denied due process of law. These are just a few among many incidents that have been threatening freedom of expression in Ethiopia since PM Abiy Ahmed took office.

## Recommendations

The HRLHA calls on the United Nations Human Rights Council member states to consider this issue under “Item 4: Human rights situations that require the Council’s attention” and urge the Government of Ethiopia:

- Create a Commission of Inquiry on human rights to investigate gross violations of human rights and ensure accountability of perpetrators.
- Immediately ratify the 1998 Rome Statute of International Criminal Court and the 2010 International Convention for Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances.
- Stop politically motivated brutalities and detentions, and unconditionally release all arbitrarily detained officials, members and supporters of opposition political parties and journalists languishing in official and secrete detention centers.
- Create a genuine and sustainable dialogue with the Oromo Liberation Army that will work towards ensuring lasting peace and stability in Oromia.

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<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘Ethiopia: Communications Shutdown Takes Heavy Toll: Restore Internet, Phone Services in Oromia’ (March 09, 2020), available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/09/ethiopia-communications-shutdown-takes-heavy-toll>.

<sup>6</sup> Nigeria and Ethiopia Jail Activist-journalists Amid Crackdown on Free Expression (December 11, 2019), available at: <https://cpj.org/2019/12/nigeria-ethiopia-free-expression-crackdown/>.