

SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE FOR ETHIOPIAN POLITICAL PRISONERS - CANADA (SOCEPP-CAN)

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Report of the Ottawa (Canada) Panel Discussion on Human Rights & Election 2010 in Ethiopia

Executive Summary

Organized by the *Solidarity Committee for Ethiopian Political Prisoners in Ethiopia – (SOCEPP-CAN)*, a member of *The Canadian Peace-building Network (Peacebuild)*, a panel discussion of invited parliamentarians, civic society organizations and other guests was held on Parliament Hill in Ottawa (Canada) on November 18, 2009 on two important agenda items: *The state of Human Rights and Election 2010 in Ethiopia*.

The meeting was successfully concluded after hours of sober deliberation on a wide range of issues including: evaluation of the 2005 failed elections, country wide repressions, crime/s against humanity in various parties of the country including the Gambella and Ogaden Regions, and the present campaign of nation wide intimidation as reported by *The Globe and Mail* (a Toronto-based daily newspaper).

At the conclusion of the panel it was agreed that based on consensus built around various issues, resolutions and recommendations be made and released to the general public through this communiqué.



Panelists & Participants

The panelists were three members of the Federal Parliament of Canada namely: *Hon. Maria Minna, Beaches & East York (Toronto) - Liberal*; *Mr. Paul Dewar, MP & Foreign Affairs Critic (NDP)*; and *Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis, MP, Winnipeg (NDP)*; *Mr. Alex Neve, Executive Director, Amnesty International (Canada)*; *Mr. Nicholas Galletti, Senior Policy Advisor to the president of Rights & Democracy Organization*; *Mr. David*

Lord, Executive Director of Pecaebuild; Ms. Fowsia Abdulkadir, Rep. of the Ogaden Human Rights Committee, and Mr. Aklilu Wondaferew, Chair of SOCEPP-Canada. From among the 60 or so people present at the meeting through invitations, there were four other Federal Parliamentarians; representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs & International Trade (DEFAIT); a representative of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA); Civic Organization representatives including a human rights rep of the Ethiopian Association in the GTA & Surrounding Regions, and other invited guests of Ethiopian and Canadian origin.



Main themes of the discussion

- The meeting started with the viewing of an eleven minute moving video released on the first anniversary of the failed 2005 election in Ethiopia by Ms. **Ana Gomez**, MP (EU Parliament) and Head of the EU Election Observer Mission to Ethiopia.
- Democracy & Rights: there is an explicit and unambiguous linking of democracy to human rights. The Obama speech in Egypt and Ghana highlights this.
- Amnesty International: Bertukan Mideksa is a prisoner of conscience. Bashir Ahmed Makhtal, a Canadian citizen of Ethiopian origin, is another prisoner of conscience whose brother was also imprisoned, tortured, and died mysteriously soon after release. Genocide and/or a crime against humanity may have been perpetrated against Ethiopians in Gambella and the Ogaden regions and that this is being investigated by Genocide Watch & others. The upcoming review of Ethiopia under the aegis of the UN is one event where the Canadian government can/should contribute positively.

- Peacebuild: the UN Development Program’s (UNDP) new guide to analysis, planning and programming for: “Elections and Conflict Prevention” is a good tool for measuring the potential credibility of the Ethiopian electoral process.¹
- Ogaden Human Rights Committee: There is a major contradiction between EPRDF’s own constitution and what its deeds on the ground ever since. The hopes of the Ethiopian people and the international community were dashed when it started responding to questions of democracy with the barrel of the gun. The Ogaden region has been a target of crimes against humanity as has the region of Gambella. Ethiopians in Diaspora must come together, pool their resources and create an environment of trust and heart-to-heart conversation so that we may work on a vision of Ethiopia where peace, democracy, and social justice may prevail and legitimate past grievances are properly addressed while planning the future.
- SOCEPP Canada: Lessons of the failed election 2005; the end of independent media; the criminalization of dissent; the grim human rights conditions in Ethiopia: the re-arrest of Bertukan Mideksa, Abera Yemaneab; and the case of the disappeared like EPRP’s Tsegaye G/Medhin and many others including OLF members and supporters. The signed “Code of Conduct” is a necessary but not a crucial part of the negotiation towards the 2010 election. However, because it is exclusionary, it hinders the possibility of “free and fair election” and major opposition groups including MEDREK and those banned from operating legally are not part of it.
- The Three Members of Parliament: All three MPs are in agreement that human rights issues are at the forefront of election politics and that there can be no separation between democracy and human rights. They agree that Canada must review its policies without compromising emergency aid that goes to the people to save lives(owing to famine, draught, etc.,)
- The regime must stop campaigns of intimidation and the extrajudicial arrest and detention of citizens. Miss Bertukan Mideksa and all political prisoners must be released without any preconditions
- One of the MPs talked extensively about the often abused and misused term: “War on Terrorism” which the TPLF/EPRDF regime awarded itself for fighting on the forefront as a US ally in Somalia and using the same as a pretext to criminalize any form of dissent at home. The regime must be held accountable for the atrocities committed in Somalia, the Ogaden and Gambella regions and for the mass killings during the 2005 election.
- All three parliamentarians promised that they will do everything in their power to make sure that the Ethiopian Human Rights case and Election 2010 are tabled on the floor in parliament and debated upon. They said they would continue writing letters to the Conservative Government of Mr. Stephen Harper, especially the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, to heed their repeat calls and do something about the abysmal human rights situations in Ethiopia.

¹ The guidelines referred to here were developed, in part, from UN experience of electoral processes in Kenya, Guyana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Bangladesh and Lesotho and are meant to describe how UNDP “electoral programming assistance can contribute to conflict prevention in elections.” The authors note that the guide is “not intended to be prescriptive”.

The panel recognizes that the subject of human rights and Election 2010 in Ethiopia is a subject which must be deliberated upon by all parties on a transparent and sustainable manner. Given what has transpired during the past election and what has been going on ever since, it is very unlikely that a free and fair election will take place in Ethiopia in May 2010 unless changes occur. Evidence presented by way of reports (AI, Genocide Watch, ICG, Human Rights Watch, Ana Gomez Video Presentation & the EU Observer Mission Report; and the recent article on Globe & Mail) prove that such changes have a remote possibility of happening. However, both panelists and participants agree that Ethiopians and the international community must redouble their efforts for human rights protection and the opening up of the political space.

The panel discussion noted that, as reported by ICG, “Without genuine multi-party democracy, the tensions and pressures in Ethiopia’s politics will only grow, greatly increasing the possibility of a violent eruption that would destabilize the country and the region”.

Hence, in view of the aforementioned, the following resolutions and recommendations have been adopted and authorized for release to the general public:

- 1) The government of Ethiopia must immediately and unconditionally release Miss Bertukan Mideksa and all other political prisoners without any pre-conditions. It must account for all those arrested and “disappeared” since it came to power and respect all aspects of human and democratic rights.
- 2) The ruling group in Ethiopia has to engage in negotiations on comprehensive and substantive issues of human rights, democratization, rule of law etc., with all political parties (including Medrek and the exiled opposition).
- 3) A new and effective mechanism has to be set to monitor the election and to make sure that political interference is curtailed and the rule of law is upheld. The National Election Board must be reformed in a manner that ensures its neutrality and garner the trust of the opposition. International and local election observers must be allowed to monitor polls without interference from the ruling party.
- 4) The government of PM Meles Zenawi must review, if not repeal, all the repressive laws it enacted including the “CSO” and the “Anti-Terrorism” laws to which there is so much opposition at home and within the international community. Elections and democracy become empty words without the respect of human rights in place.
- 5) The government of Mr. Zenawi must respect the words of its own constitution: Stop interfering in the operation of the law and of the courts; stop using the courts, the army and the police forces to criminalize and repress dissent, and
- 6) The international community must pressure the government of Meles Zenawi to open the entire country, including the remote regions of the Ogaden and

Gambella, to the scrutiny of the international media and human rights groups so that an independent assessment of human rights situations can be made to verify the various complaints as variously reported by Human Rights Watch, Genocide Watch and the like..

We **RECOMMEND** that:

- 1) Ethiopia and Ethiopians can benefit if the government and the opposition seriously consider the “Elections and Conflict Resolution” approach developed by the UNDP by first agreeing to extend the 2010 Election period by at least one year. All banned and willing political parties at home and in Diaspora must then be invited to a Conflict Resolution Conference in a neutral country. We call upon International Organizations such as the UNDP, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and key nations such as the US, the UK, Canada, and Norway to play a key role in this by providing logistics, finance and political space for this to happen.
- 2) The Canadian government must heed the various calls and appeals of the Ethiopian-Canadian community and the calls of opposition parliamentarians and request the government of Ethiopia to clean up its acts or face the consequences of diplomatic pressure including suspension of direct budgetary assistance.
- 3) Cognizant of the fact that the UN Human Rights Council reviews the human rights performance of the Ethiopian government very soon, we recommend that the Canadian government take this opportunity to impress upon this international body the need for a serious democratic reform and human rights protection.
- 4) It is also recommended that the Members of Parliament present during the panel discussion bring the Ethiopian human rights issue and the problems leading up to the 2010 Election to Parliament for debates and possible resolutions, and
- 5) We recommend that the opposition and civil society groups in Diaspora agree to pool their resources and do everything in their power to create the meeting of the minds as to resolve the multi-faceted problems of today’s Ethiopia. Ethnic federalism, we believe, has been misused and made a major source of conflicts and discontents. It must be revisited and resolved by assent of all parties.

The meeting was adjourned after hours of deliberation at 8:00PM and after thanking everyone who made this meeting possible including the MP who made it possible to obtain the use of this respectable meeting venue; and the Ottawa Chapter of SOCEPP Canada for organizing the event and for their invaluable service from start to finish.