



Human Rights Violations and Torture in Ethiopia

United Nations Committee against Torture, 45th session, 1 November 2010

Statement by Florian Irminger, Head of the Geneva office, Human Rights House Foundation

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson,

I would like to briefly talk about Ethiopia.

First of all, I am glad to see that the Committee has received information for its review of Ethiopia from a number of different human rights organisations. However those reports all come from either international NGOs or organisations in exile working with Ethiopian diaspora communities.

The Human Rights House Network did not provide any written information to the Committee, although we supported four partner organisations to participate in 2009 in the Universal Periodic Review of Ethiopia. Out of our four Ethiopian partner organisations, three no longer exist as human rights organisations, while the fourth has been forced to radically reduce its activity; it is no longer able to operate in the whole country and it cannot operate on all human rights issues anymore.

The reason for this development is simple:

In its report to the Human Rights Committee, the government of Ethiopia stated that “to promote the operation of charities and societies and to ensure their transparency and accountability, a Proclamation for Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies has been issued and is effective now.”¹ More than any other initiative, it is this proclamation that helped Ethiopian authorities succeed in strangling the country’s independent human rights organisations -- thus also silenced the last remaining individual human rights defenders who were still trying to operate from within Ethiopia’s borders.

In the course of the Human Rights House Foundation’s co-operation with its partners in Ethiopia over the last couple of years, we saw the dramatic impact of this Proclamation. While still in the process of preparing for the UPR, two of the four organisations we worked with announced that they would change their activities, while a third simply ceased to be active. The fourth organisation we worked with -- a major human rights organisation in Ethiopia -- is currently slowing down its activities. In order to continue at least some of its activities, mainly with money it still has on its bank account from previous years, it has closed all its branch offices in various regions across Ethiopia. The Action Professionals’ Association for the People, one of the other of our partners for the UPR, states on its website, that it has had to change its activities: “APAP has to design a strategy that would help it conform to the Proclamation.”² APAP therefore re-registered as a resident charitable organisation and not as a human rights advocacy group anymore.

Mr. Chairperson, Ethiopian human rights organisations did not all cease to exist -- the government underlines that, too, in its report to the Human Rights Committee. Those who have opted to stay in the country however have had to redefine themselves away from being human rights organisations. From now on, there is reason to believe that independent human rights work will only be done in a low-key,

¹ Initial report of Ethiopia to the Human Rights Committee, 22 October 2010, § 210 *in fine*, page 35 (UN Doc.: CCPR/C/ETH/1).

² See: <<http://www.apapeth.org/News/Recent6/StrategyChange.html>>.



discrete manner, reactively, and mostly in terms of service provision to individual victims -- torture cases will not be brought to the public anymore, nor will there be any activities monitoring the implementation of Ethiopia's international obligations to prevent acts of torture in any territory under its jurisdiction (art. 2 § 1 of the Convention)

In other words, what we are unlikely to see from now on is proactive human rights advocacy on any of the many pressing issues in the country. Neither will the remaining organisations be able to report as they used to on human rights violations, or network, co-operate or build coalitions. Indeed, following the introduction of the Societies and Charities Proclamation, it is hard to imagine any further open engagement on any human rights issue, from any remaining NGO. A direct consequence of the Societies and Charities Proclamation is that this Committee does not receive any relevant information from Ethiopian civil society inside the country on torture cases,

This, Mr. Chairperson, is certainly what the Ethiopian government calls an effective application of the proclamation 621/2009 on the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies and it explains why you did not receive any information from Ethiopian human rights organisation on the implementation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Thank you!