

May 5, 2015

To: President Barack Obama, President of the United States

From: Concerned Ethiopians and Ethiopian-Americans

Subject: Stamp of Approval to Single-Party Dictatorship in Ethiopia

“If the dignity of the individual is upheld across Africa, then I believe Americans will be more free as well, because I believe that none of us are fully free when others in the human family remain shackled by poverty or disease or oppression...Governments that respect the rights of their citizens and abide by the rule of law do better, grow faster.”

President Obama, South Africa, June 30, 2013

Dear Mr. President,

It is with sheer dismay, deep disappointment and disbelief that millions of Ethiopians within and outside Ethiopia heard Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman has given a stamp of approval to one of the most oppressive governments on the planet during an official visit to Addis Ababa, April 16, 2015. Her statement that “Ethiopia is a democracy that is moving forward in an election that we expect to be free, fair, credible, open and inclusive in ways that Ethiopia has moved forward in strengthening its democracy” is utterly baseless and untrue. At least 30 opposition parties have boycotted the May 2015 Parliamentary Elections. Multiethnic parties have been crushed and replaced by parties that are loyal to the Tigray People’s Liberation Front, the minority ethnic group that dominates the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In effect, the ruling party is running against itself.

All fair minded and objective human rights groups such as Amnesty International, U.S.A, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, Freedom Now, Ethiopian Human Rights Project, International Rivers and others provide a plethora of evidence that Ethiopia’s political, social and religious climate has deteriorated over the past five years.

We agree with the statement six of the above seven organizations cosigned and sent to Secretary of State John Kerry on April 17, 2015. “We are deeply troubled over the comments made by Under Secretary Wendy Sherman recently in Addis Ababa. The Under Secretary’s unfortunate statement calling Ethiopia a democracy puts the United States government on record as endorsing a government that systematically suppresses the fundamental rights of its citizens. Political pluralism and the ability of Ethiopians to freely express themselves, associate, and participate in peaceful assembly is far more restricted today than ten years ago under the same government, reflecting a dramatic deterioration in the government’s respect for fundamental civil and political rights. Since 2005, the ruling party’s dominance of the political landscape, repression of political opposition parties and restrictions on media and civil society have only increased.

Under Secretary Sherman's comments are baffling to any observer of developments in Ethiopia and contradict the assessments of human rights organizations and even other governments. Her statements also undermine the courageous work of those pushing for a freer Ethiopia, many of whom are now imprisoned for exercising their fundamental human rights."

From its inception, the TPLF dominated government was determined to rule Ethiopia by manipulating one group against another. For example, in its early days, it encouraged Muslims to demean and fight Christians. It bifurcated the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and politicized its spiritual leadership: we now have two synods, one in Ethiopia and another abroad. The government instigated the burning of more than 30 Churches. In one case, a local church hosting Sunday Church services was burned to the ground while people were praying. Over the past three years, the Ethiopian government began an all-out assault on members and leaders of the Muslim faith. More specifically, Ethiopian members of the Muslim faith have been persecuted, beaten, harassed and several of them killed by government security forces only for demanding the realization of their fundamental and constitutional rights of religious freedom and for voicing against the imposition of an 'Islamic' sect on their community imported from outside. Their leaders who initially represented them in the negotiations with the Ethiopian government have been languishing in jail without justice for the past three years. Spiritual leaders and members of this two major faiths wish to coexist with one another as they have done for 1,400 years. The Ethiopian government has a constitutional obligation on non-interference in the affairs of both religions.

On April 21, 2015, CPJ reported that "Eritrea and Ethiopia are the most censored nations in the world." Last year, CPJ reported "A state crackdown on independent publications and bloggers in Ethiopia this year more than doubled the number of journalists imprisoned to 17, from seven the previous year, and prompted several journalists to flee into exile." In 2014, the U.S. Department of State reported that Ethiopia is a source and destination for men, women and children "subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking." Ethiopian girls as young as 8 years of age are subjected to "domestic servitude throughout the Middle East, as well as in the Sudan and South Sudan." This and other reports indicate that "The central market in Addis Ababa is home to the largest collection of brothels in Africa."

Mr. President,

The vast majority of Ethiopians, most born after the current government took power in 1991 are robbed of their dignity in two ways: they are not free to demand justice or to find employment at home; and they face uncertain and degrading conditions when they leave their homes in search of opportunities abroad. The beheading and wholesale massacre of 30 Ethiopian Christians by ISIS/Libya because of their faith and nationality attests to debilitating poverty and repression at home. Petrol bombing of Ethiopians and other killings in South Africa reinforce the primary reason why they leave Ethiopia in the first place. According to Yemeni government sources and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) one million Ethiopian refugees are trapped in war torn Yemen. Many have been killed and a large number have been wounded. In November 2013, the Government of Saudi Arabia expelled 163,000 Ethiopians.

In the aftermath of the slayings in Libya, hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians across the globe mourned and prayed for the dead and questioned the legitimacy of their own government accusing it that it does not

defend their rights and denies them freedom, justice and opportunities. Protesters lamented on their slogans, “Do we have a government that cares? Where is it and what does it stand for?” The Minister of Foreign Affairs acknowledged that among the culprits were Ethiopian “human traffickers” who make millions. “You (traffickers) have blood in your hands.” There was no acknowledgement that the government itself is the primary driver of the injustice. His rhetorical question, “Haven’t you had enough? Don’t you have feelings for your fellow brothers and sisters?” begs the question if Ethiopians do not deserve a change in government and leadership now. Contrary to Ms. Sherman’s assertions, the government responded to expression of dissent by arresting hundreds of protestors who belong to the Blue Party under the pretext of inciting unrest.

During the peaceful demonstrations, the Ethiopian government instructed federal police and security agents to beat up and club peaceful protestors grieving for the dead and demanding answers and accountability. Beyond the symbolic rhetoric and call for three days of national mourning, the governing party shows no sign of letting up its repressive deeds against peaceful protestors. Even at a time of national humiliation and mourning the Ethiopian government considers any peaceful dissent, criticism of the government and protest for justice and accountability, the rule of law and democracy as a form of “terrorism.” Ethiopia has one of the highest populations of political prisoners in the world. The draconian 2009 Anti-Terrorism and Charities and Societies Proclamations, that the U.S. Department of State had identified as blunt instruments to suppress dissent are still intact.

Mr. President,

Ethiopians “are shackled by debilitating poverty “and mal-distribution of incomes and wealth as well as by draconian laws that keep them trapped. There is no single independent institution left to speak on their behalf. In “**Journalism is not a crime**” January 22, 2015, Human Rights Watch reported as follows. “The Ethiopian government’s systematic repression of independent media has created a bleak landscape for free expression ahead of the May 2015 general elections. In the past year, six privately owned publications closed after government harassment; at least 22 journalists, bloggers and publishers were criminally charged, and more than 30 journalists fled the country in fear of being arrested under repressive laws.” Clearly, they can’t play any role in the May elections, in defending human rights or in reporting about the massive corruption and illicit outflow of funds that are bleeding the country.

“In **Ethiopia, a Chilling Message**” April 21, 2015, the Washington Post highlighted the plight of the Zone 9 bloggers arrested during Secretary of State John Kerry’s visit to Ethiopia last year. The U.S. Department of State “criticized the Ethiopian high court’s decision in January to proceed with the trial saying that it “undermines a free and open media environment.” Their case illustrates the enormous hurdles the new generation of Ethiopians face in demanding their rights and freedoms that the U.S. and other Western democracies say are essential in lifting people out of poverty and oppression. The Ethiopian government continues to refuse to practice provisions of human rights contained in its own constitution. “Ethiopia is a multiparty democracy on paper” only. Currently, the “ruling party controls all but one seat in Parliament.” The façade of “free, fair and credible” multiparty elections this coming May won’t change this preponderance. The ruling party has preselected numerous parties to compete to give the one-party state

a false sense of “multiparty-democracy.” Perhaps, it will win less than 99 percent of the votes against a higher percentage in the last election.

Mr. President,

We take your word and the commitment of the United States that the advancement of human freedom enshrined in the rule of law is critical for durable peace, stability, sustainable and equitable development. Free, independent and prosperous people are more likely to defend themselves and their countries against terrorism than people who are oppressed and marginalized by their own governments. Ethiopia’s federal police and judicial system is heavily politicized. The World Economic Forum rated Ethiopia 2.7 out of “a best possible score of 7” of its judicial system. This rating converges with other low scores including Freedom House’s latest rating of Ethiopia as among the “least free in the world.” The Ethiopian government dismisses these ratings as unacceptable. “The Ethiopian government has rejected criticism from Western governments and human rights groups about the handling of the Bloggers” and other cases including massive displacements of indigenous people from their ancestral lands.

Mr. President,

We feel deeply that the criminalization of freedom of the press, civil society and political pluralism is against the long-term interests of the Ethiopian and American people and should not be given a stamp of approval for short term gains. We recognize, acknowledge and support the notion that terrorism in the Horn of Africa poses an existential threat to countries in the region, the U.S. and the World; and should be stopped. We respectfully disagree that the way to deter terrorism is by terrorizing innocent people by their own government. This is the case in Ethiopia.

Mr. President,

By declaring Ethiopia a democratic state, Ms. Sherman has given credence to Ethiopia’s oppressive government. Her statement and position on behalf of the U.S. government goes against documentary evidence of recurring and gross human rights violations, decimation of civil society and free press, suppression of religious freedom, complete closure of political and social space and unbearable socioeconomic life for the vast majority of the Ethiopian people, degrading human trafficking and an unprecedented level of human exodus of young girls and boys that leave Ethiopia at a rate unheard of in the country’s history. The Ethiopian government estimates that each day 1,500 young Ethiopians leave the country legally and another 3,500 through human smuggling. The mathematics of more than one million Ethiopian youth fleeing from Ethiopia depicts poor, exclusionary and oppressive governance. Ethiopia’s youth see no hope in their own country’s future. All countries that are genuine democracies make every effort to meet the aspirations and hopes of their people. They create jobs and other opportunities so that the country does not hemorrhage from the loss of its human capital.

There is not a shred of evidence to support Ms. Sherman’s contention that “Ethiopia is a democracy and that the current election is free, fair and credible.” Her statement is not shared by the vast majority of the Ethiopian people. Nor do we believe that it is widely shared by the American people or the government of the United States. We do not know the basis of her contention that “Every time there is an election it gets

better and better.” The statement demeans the Ethiopian people and harms America’s long-term interests not only in Ethiopia but also in the rest of Africa. Ethiopia’s conditions are worse today than they were five years ago. Furthermore, her boisterous approval of the government is contradicted by the Department of State that had reported on January 29, 2015 as follows: “In recent years, the Ethiopian government has taken steps to restrict political space for the opposition through intimidation and harassment, tighten its control over civil society, and curtail the activities of independent media.”

Mr. President,

Relations between the American and Ethiopian people span more than 100 years; and will endure for hundreds of years regardless of regime change. Accordingly, we urge you and the government of the United States that you lead to stand firm on the side of freedom, justice, equality, the rule of law and democracy for all of the Ethiopian people.

We genuinely believe that America’s lasting contribution to Ethiopia and the rest of Africa is its unbridled commitment to promote America’s core values of good governance, the rule of law, equitable access to social and economic opportunities, advancement of civil society, independent and free media and political pluralism; and not to shore-up, give accolades to, bankroll and give a stamp of approval to one the most repressive and oppressive governments in the world.

Accordingly, we urge you, Mr. President, to instruct the Secretary of State John Kerry to rescind MS. Sherman’s wrongful and harmful statement at the earliest opportunity.

On our part, we will work hard to advance the causes of peace, national reconciliation, freedom, the rule of law and democracy in our ancestral land. As Ethiopians and Ethiopian-Americans, we believe our voices should be heard.

We thank you for your understanding and attention to this urgent matter.

Ethiopian Border Affairs Committee (EBAC)

Ethiopian National Transitional Council (ENTC)

Ethiopian People’s Congress for United Struggle (Shengo)

Ethiopian Youth National Movement (EYNM)

United Ethiopian Muslims Peaceful Movement Support Group (UEM-PMSG)