



General Assembly

Distr.: General
XX May 2016

English only

Human Rights Council

Thirty-second session

Agenda item 4

Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, 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.

[30 May 2016]

1 * This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Human Rights situation in Ethiopia

Since November of 2015, thousands of Oromo, members of Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, took part in protests that were sparked by fears over government plans to extend control from the capital Addis Ababa into the surrounding Oromia region, which could displace thousands of Oromo farmers. After the government announced it had scrapped the plan, the protests continued, now focusing on the marginalization and lack of freedom for the Oromo.

Ethiopia's security forces' continued to respond with excessive and in many cases lethal force against the largely peaceful protesters, killing hundreds and arresting tens of thousands more. There are many reports of torture in detention.

Because of the Ethiopian government's efforts to repress free media, it is impossible to get exact numbers. While the death toll was estimated to be around 240 in March of 2016, current estimates from Ethiopian human rights activists range in the area of 450 casualties. More than 1,500 people are thought to be injured by the security forces' bullets. Additionally, some 20,000 people were arbitrarily detained from all over Oromia. Over 7,000 of them are believed to be taken to the Tolay and Huriso army camps. In many cases, members of the opposition are being detained for months without trial and without their families knowing of their whereabouts.

The government around prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn disputes these numbers, adding that "anti-peace forces... in a bid to divert the people's legitimate questions... have inflicted losses on human lives and government and private property", and that the government "will intensify their decisive actions against the anti-peace forces".

Repressive laws, such as the "Charities and Societies Proclamation" of 2009 severely restrict the activities of nongovernmental organizations and make the effective work on human rights issues virtually impossible.

The authorities use arbitrary arrests and politically motivated prosecutions to silence journalists, bloggers, protesters, and perceived supporters of opposition parties. A recent example is Yonatan Tesfaye, the head of public relations of the opposition Semayawi Party, who at the beginning of May 2016 was charged with "planning, preparation, conspiracy, incitement and attempt" of a terrorist act after being held in pre-trial detention since December 2015. As evidence, the authorities quoted his Facebook posts, in which he spoke out against a possible land grab in the Oromia region in the course of a planned land reform by the government. He faces 15 years to life in prison, if he is convicted.

Almost all the leaders of the OFC (Oromo Federalist Congress), the opposition party of the Oromo and Oromia's largest registered political party, are under house arrest or in Maikalawi, a prison notorious for torture, including Bekele Gerba (Deputy Chairman) and Dejene Tafa (Deputy General Secretary), after they were charged under the counterterrorism law that is commonly used by the government to criminalize any form of criticism.

The situation is similarly dire for journalists: most of the radio (which is the main news medium in rural areas) and television stations are run by the state, most print publications are closely affiliated with the government as well.

If they do cover political news and issues, they rarely express a different view than the one advanced by the government. Journalists and bloggers who criticize government policies have to constantly fear harassment and arrest of themselves or of their family members and friends. Many blogs and websites run by Ethiopians abroad are blocked inside Ethiopia, as well as, at various times, Facebook, Twitter and Dropbox. Radio broadcasts such as Voice of America and Deutsche Welle are intermittently being jammed as well.

Ethiopia has a complete monopoly over its quickly growing telecommunications sector through the state-owned operator, Ethio Telecom. Relying on this monopoly, the government successfully limits access to information and freedom of expression in the internet in addition to surveilling phone calls of members of the opposition. Since there is no independent legislative or judicial mechanism to protect the privacy rights of Ethiopians, the authorities are able to act without any oversight. Additionally, there have been reports that in some areas, the telephone and internet lines were cut off to impede the spread of information.

In order to drastically modernize its economy, Ethiopia is pursuing a controversial agricultural development program that focuses on leasing large areas of land to foreign investors for them to develop the land and establish large-scale industrial farms. About 1.5 million of indigenous people have already been forced from their homes, farms and grazing lands to make way for these agricultural plantations. Those who refuse face intimidation, beatings, rapes, arbitrary detention and imprisonment, and even death. The repression of social resistance to land investments is even stipulated in some land lease contracts: "[it is the] state's obligation to 'deliver and hand over the vacant possession of leased land free of impediments' and to provide free security 'against any riot, disturbance or any turbulent time.'

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to:

- call on the Ethiopian authorities to stop the violent crackdown on peaceful protesters,
- stop arbitrary detentions of protesters, journalists and members of the opposition and to free the ones already unjustly imprisoned,
- stop the massive surveillance of telecommunication and the internet,
- end the restrictions on free media,
- stop the state-supported land grabbing by foreign agricultural investors.