

Washington Update - July 28, 2017

The House Committee on Foreign Affairs has taken an important step toward supporting human rights and democracy in Ethiopia. On July 27 it passed House Resolution 128, “Supporting respect for human rights and encouraging inclusive governance in Ethiopia.” A copy of the resolution is available at <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20170727/106341/BILLS-115-HRes128-S000522-Amdt-048.pdf>.

Speaking in favor of the resolution, which he sponsored, Rep. Chris Smith said the resolution “is like a mirror held up to the government of Ethiopia on how others see them.” He slammed the Ethiopian regime, saying its “continuing violations of human rights are absolutely unacceptable.” Smith noted that the U.S. State Department’s report on human rights documents a litany of human rights abuses by the Ethiopian government, “including arbitrary arrests, killings and torture,” as well as “restrictions on the freedom of expression and the freedom of association, politically motivated trials, intimidation of opposition members and journalists.”

Smith described two of the many individuals who have been tortured by the Ethiopian government. “These are not the actions of a government that respects human rights, as they say they do,” he said. Smith noted that he has been traveling to Ethiopia since 2005 trying without success to persuade the government to respect human rights.

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher called the Ethiopian government “a corrupt regime that is also oppressive and brutal with its own people.” He noted that the Ethiopian regime has stolen property from its own citizens and from U.S. citizens. He added that this “property theft nowhere near as offensive to our values as the murder and torture that goes on in Ethiopia. What we have is a dictatorship that knows no bounds.”

H. Res. 128, entitled “Supporting respect for human rights and encouraging inclusive governance in Ethiopia,” condemns the human rights abuses of Ethiopia and calls on the Ethiopian government to:

- * lift the state of emergency;
- * end the use of excessive force by security forces;
- * investigate the killings and excessive use of force that took place as a result of protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions;
- * release dissidents, activists, and journalists who have been imprisoned for exercising constitutional rights;
- * respect the right to peaceful assembly and guarantee freedom of the press;
- * engage in open consultations with citizens regarding its development strategy;

- * allow a United Nations rapporteur to conduct an independent examination of the state of human rights in Ethiopia;
- * address the grievances brought forward by representatives of registered opposition parties;
- * hold accountable those responsible for killing, torturing and detaining innocent civilians who exercised their constitutional rights; and
- * investigate and report on the circumstances surrounding the September 3, 2016, shootings and fire at Qilinto Prison, the deaths of persons in attendance at the annual Irreecha festivities at Lake Hora near Bishoftu on October 2, 2016, and the ongoing killings of civilians over several years in the Somali Regional State by police.

“It is important to note that this resolution does not call for sanctions on the Government of Ethiopia, but it does call for the use of existing mechanisms to sanction individuals who torture or otherwise deny their countrymen their human and civil rights,” said Smith.

Smith has chaired three hearings on Ethiopia, the most recent of which looked into the deterioration of the human rights situation in Ethiopia and was titled “Ethiopia After Meles: The Future of Democracy and Human Rights.”

The Committee’s vote clears the way to bring the resolution to a vote by the full House of Representatives. It is time for all Ethiopian-Americans to contact their member of Congress and urge them to support S. 128.

Mesfin Mekonen