



Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council
Sixth Session of the Working Group on the UPR (30 November - 11 December 2009)
Ethiopia

**Written statement submitted by The Advocates for Human Rights,
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status
pursuant to HRC resolution 5/1 of 18 June 2007**

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Advocates for Human Rights (AHR or The Advocates) is a volunteer-based non-governmental organization committed to the impartial promotion and protection of international human rights standards and the rule of law. AHR conducts a range of programs to promote human rights in the United States and around the world, including monitoring and fact finding, direct legal representation, education and training, and publications. The Advocates has produced more than 50 reports documenting human rights practices in more than 25 countries; educated more than 10,000 students and community members on human rights issues; and provided legal representation to thousands of low-income individuals seeking asylum in the United States. AHR holds special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council.

Since 2004, AHR has documented reports from members of the Oromo ethnic group living in diaspora in the United States of human rights abuses they and their friends and family experienced in Ethiopia. The Advocates conducted over 65 interviews of Ethiopians, including Oromo and other ethnic group members; scholars; immigration attorneys; medical professionals; and other service providers working with Ethiopians in the United States. In addition, The Advocates monitored news and human rights reporting on events in Ethiopia.

Based on this information, AHR is gravely concerned about the continued human rights violations against the Oromo people committed by the Government of Ethiopia, as reported by Ethiopian nationals living in diaspora in the United States and by news media and human rights organizations monitoring conditions in Ethiopia. Despite credible, sustained reports of human rights abuses committed by the Ethiopian government since coming to power in 1991, the Government of Ethiopia continues practices that violate its international human rights obligations.

II. PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS ON THE GROUND

A. Implementation of international human rights obligations

1. Right to life, liberty and security of the person

Sustained persecution of Oromo people: Members of the Oromo ethnic group continue to report violations of human rights by the government. AHR received credible reports of arbitrary arrest, detention without charge, and torture of Oromos by the Government of Ethiopia.

Reports of **arbitrary arrest and detention** based upon suspicion of association with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) have continued into recent years. For example, one Oromo man who lives in Minnesota reported to AHR that when visiting Ethiopia in 2004, he attended a celebration with friends. The next day all of the people he had been with were arrested on allegations of supporting the OLF. In 2007, detainees reportedly were held on suspicion of belonging to the OLF.¹ One woman reported that, in early 2005, she received a report that her relative, an Oromo businessman, was arrested, that money and goods were taken from his store, and the store was closed because of suspicion that it was funding the OLF.

Human rights organizations reported that the federal police responded to a peaceful Oromo student demonstration at Addis Ababa University in January 2004 by arresting between 330 and 350 students.² In April 2004, two journalists with the Oromo Service of Ethiopian Television, Debassa Wakjira and Shiferaw Ansermu, were arrested on allegations of passing information to the OLF.³ In March 2004, Ethiopian police beat and abused Atnafu Alemayehu, the deputy editor-in-chief of Oromia's *Tobia*.⁴ In August 2004, Human Rights Watch reported on the arrest and torture of an Oromo man because the Ethiopian National Defense Force suspected his son was raising money on behalf of the OLF in London.⁵ In the 2008 regional elections, the leader of the Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (OFDM) said that the government had threatened most of his party's candidates and forced them to pull out of the race.⁶

Violence in the Ogaden Region: In June 2007, Ethiopia launched a military campaign in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, which has resulted in grave human rights violations. Ethiopian soldiers have chased women and children from wells in the desert and blocked civilians from getting medical care.⁷ One physician stated that she saw soldiers stab to death a donkey being used to transport water, a woman who had been beaten by soldiers when she was looking for her children, and a ten-year old who had been injured by a mine.⁸ Ethiopian troops have beaten and strangled civilians, staged public executions, and burned villages in Ogaden.⁹

Other reports of human rights violations are widespread. For instance, the Ethiopian government has forced untrained civilians, including doctors, teachers, clerks, and government employees, to fight rebels in the Ogaden region.¹⁰ Dozens of cases of severe abuse by Ethiopian troops in the Ogaden, including gang rapes, arson, and "demonstration killings" like hangings and beheadings meant to terrorize the population have been documented.¹¹ Civilians describe a widespread and

¹ *Ethiopia Detains 107 People Over the Past Two Months*, USA TODAY, Sept. 5, 2007.

² Human Rights Watch, *Suppressing Dissent: Human Rights Abuses and Political Repression in Ethiopia's Oromia Region*, Vol. 17, No. 7(A), May 2005.

³ Int'l Press Institute, Update, May 2005; Comm. to Protect Journalists, *Attacks on the Press 2004: Ethiopia*.

⁴ U.S. Dept. of State, *Ethiopia, 2007 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* (Mar. 11, 2008).

⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Suppressing Dissent*, *supra* note 2.

⁶ *Ethiopia Opposition Alleges Intimidation at the Polls*, INT'L HERALD TRIB., Apr. 14, 2008.

⁷ *Ethiopia Blocking Civilian Access to Medicine in Conflict Zone, Agency Says*, INT'L HERALD TRIB., Sept. 4, 2007.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Group Accuses Ethiopia of War Crimes in Ogaden*, INT'L HERALD TRIB., June 12, 2008.

¹⁰ *In Rebel Region, Ethiopia Turns to Civilian Patrols*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 14, 2007.

¹¹ *Id.*

long standing reign of terror, with Ethiopian soldiers gang raping women, burning down huts, and killing civilians at will.¹² A 40-year-old camel herder who was too frightened to give her last name said that soldiers took her to a police station, put her in a cell, and twisted her nipples with pliers.¹³ According to her account, the government security forces routinely rounded up women under the pretext that they were rebel supporters so they could bring them to jail and rape them.

2. Right to privacy, marriage and family life

Reports of **violations of the right to privacy** include surveillance, monitoring of telephone conversations, and interference with mail and e-mail. Regardless of the level of surveillance engaged in by the Government of Ethiopia, there is a widespread belief among members of the Oromo diaspora that communications are monitored. One woman reported delays in receiving e-mail communications from Ethiopia, believing that those emails are blocked and monitored. Another woman reported that her nephew had e-mails from his family intercepted and that he was shown copies of the emails while in jail.

3. Freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and right to participate in public and political life

Ethiopia's parliament passed a **Proclamation for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies in January 2009**. The January 2009 proclamation prohibits foreign agencies from working in the areas of human rights, equality, conflict resolution, and the rights of children. Local civil society organizations that receive more than ten percent of their funding from abroad, including from the Ethiopian diaspora, are also banned from working in these areas. Even prior to the January 2009 proclamation, AHR received reports that independent Oromo human-rights organizations had difficulty operating in Ethiopia. They described the hurdles organizations must overcome to get a license to operate, to maintain independence, and to continue to operate in the face of surveillance, harassment, and the incarceration of its leader and other members.

Reports of violations of the right to freedom of speech are also widespread in Ethiopia. According to the Associated Press, Ethiopia tops a list of 10 countries where press freedom has deteriorated over the past five years.¹⁴ Three journalists for The New York Times were arrested by the Ethiopian military in 2007, held for five days, and interrogated at gunpoint.¹⁵ They were later released without charges and have now left Ethiopia.¹⁶ The journalists had entered the country on journalist visas, were never told why they were detained, and Ethiopian military officials refused to notify the American embassy of their arrest.¹⁷ During questioning, one female reporter was kicked in the back, and all three were repeatedly threatened. In 2006, 111 journalists and opposition leaders were jailed for treason, inciting violence, and genocide.¹⁸ Dozen of newspapers have been closed and a new press law has put restrictions on what can and cannot be printed.¹⁹

¹² *In Ethiopia Fear and Cries of Army Brutality*, N.Y. TIMES, June 18, 2007.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Ethiopia Tops List of Countries Where Press Freedom is Deteriorating*, INT'L HERALD TRIB., May 2, 2007.

¹⁵ *Ethiopia Releases Detained Times Journalists*, N.Y. TIMES, May 23, 2007.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Freedom of Speech Suffers In Tense Ethiopia*, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, Dec. 13, 2006.

¹⁹ *Id.*

Election Violence: Elections were held in Ethiopia for the 547-member lower house of parliament and for the regional representative assemblies on May 15, 2005. The EPRDF won a majority of the seats, securing Meles Zenawi's third five-year term as prime minister. The Government of Ethiopia allowed over 300 international observers to monitor the elections.²⁰ Initial reports from monitors suggested that these elections were the most free and fair in Ethiopia's history.²¹

Despite the initial reports, however, the elections were marred by mass killings on the streets of the capital as police openly fired on opposition supporters and protesters who believed that the elections were fixed—tarnishing Ethiopia's image as “an emerging beacon of African democracy.”²² Complaints of electoral fraud included, but were not limited to gunmen intimidating voters, people being forced to vote for certain parties, ballot boxes being stuffed or disappearing and the number of ballots exceeding those of registered voters.²³

Immediately after the elections, the Government of Ethiopia instituted a one-month ban on all demonstrations in Addis Ababa, which was later extended an additional month.²⁴ The government arrested tens of thousands of people—including journalists, NGO workers, and opposition activists—who spent weeks or even months in prison without charge.²⁵ The government charged opposition leaders with crimes, such as treason and genocide.²⁶ In December 2005, the government charged 131 opposition, media, and civil society leaders with capital offenses including “outrages against the constitution.”²⁷ Key opposition leaders and almost all of the 131 were later pardoned and released from prison.²⁸ In the summer of 2007, the government released 71 opposition leaders, but only after they signed a letter admitting their participation in inciting violent protests after the elections.²⁹

After the student protests, the government initiated an inquiry into electoral fraud that was denounced as a sham by opposition parties claiming that those providing the evidence were being harassed and threatened and that at least one witness was killed.³⁰ In October 2006, an independent report revealed that the government had concealed the true extent of deaths at the hands of the police after the May 2005 elections.³¹ The report described the deaths as a massacre, stated that the death toll was likely much higher than reported, and that “there was no doubt that

²⁰ *Democracy Takes a Hit*, West & Central Africa, Vol. 6, Issue 8, Aug. 2005 at 7; The Carter Center, Ethiopia Elections: Dispatch from Addis Adaba, May 16, 2005.

²¹ Rob Crilly, *Confusion Reigns After Ethiopia Votes*, IRISH TIMES, July 21, 2005.

²² *A Brittle Western Ally in the Horn of Africa*, ECONOMIST, Vol. 385, Issue 8553, Nov. 3, 2007, at 31-33;

Democracy Takes a Hit, West & Central Africa, Vol. 6, Issue 8, Aug. 2005 at 7.

²³ *Ethiopia: Hundreds of Complaints Delay Release of Poll Results*, THE NEW YORK AMSTERDAM NEWS, June 9-15, 2005, at 2; *Ethiopian Students and Police Clash Over Disputed Elections Results*, N.Y. TIMES, June 7, 2005, at A5.

²⁴ *Ethiopia Bans Protests*, NORTHERN TERRITORY NEWS, May 17, 2005; *Democracy Takes a Hit*, West & Central Africa, Vol. 6, Issue 8, Aug. 2005 at 7; *22 Killed as Ethiopian Forces Opened Fire at Protest Over Vote Count*, N.Y. TIMES, June 9, 2005.

²⁵ *A Brittle Western Ally*, *supra* note 22, at 31-33.

²⁶ *Treason Charges*, AFRICAN RESEARCH BULLETIN, Vol. 42, No. 12, Dec. 2005, at 16468.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *A Brittle Western Ally*, *supra* note 22, at 31-33; *Opposition Leaders Freed: What is Behind the Government's Change of Heart?*, AFRICA RESEARCH BULLETIN, Aug. 1-31, 2007, at 17199.

³⁰ Crilly, *supra* note 21.

³¹ *Ethiopian Protesters "Massacred"*, BBC NEWS, Oct. 16, 2006.

excessive force had been used.”³² Parliament denied a full hearing on the findings.³³ Subsequently, three members of the inquiry commission fled Ethiopia including Judge Wolde-Michael Meshesha, Mitiku Teshome, and Frehiwot Samuel.³⁴

Again in 2008, local elections were marred with reports of EPRDF’s intimidation and abuse of opposition candidates. Given the fact that the CUD’s leaders were incarcerated after the 2005 elections and spent most of the intervening time in jail, the party’s leaders were unable to register its candidates in time for the 2008 elections.³⁵ On April 10, 2008, the UEDF, the largest coalition of opposition parties, pulled out of the 2008 elections, alleging intimidation by EPRDF officials and procedural irregularities.³⁶ The Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement, another opposition party, remarked that up to 3,000 of its candidates may have been forced to drop out as a result of the EPRDF’s intimidation of its proposed candidates.³⁷ The EPRDF won more than 95 percent of all positions in the 2008 elections, solidifying the EPRDF’s near-monopoly on political power at the local level.³⁸

4. Right to participate in the cultural life of the community

Diaspora Oromos reported particular concern about **restrictions on speaking *Oromiffa*, the Oromo language**. While the Government of Ethiopia restored Oromo language rights in 1994, reports of targeting of Oromos upon suspicion of belonging to or supporting the OLF because they spoke *Oromiffa* in public were recorded. In addition, Oromos reported that as a result of mandatory use of *Oromiffa* in schools in Oromia, Oromo students are at a disadvantage when seeking admission to university where English or Amharic is the preferred language.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Another Inquiry Commission Official Defects*, ETHIOMEDIA, Oct. 21, 2006.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Ethiopia Votes in Local Elections*, BBC NEWS, Apr. 13, 2008.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Ethiopia: Repression Sets Stage for Non-Competitive Elections*, Apr. 9, 2008. By contrast, state-controlled media reports that the EPRDF will field more than four million candidates across the country. *Id.*

³⁷ *Ethiopia Opposition Group to Boycott Local Elections*, SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIB., Apr. 10, 2008, <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/world/20080410-0724-ethiopia-elections.html>.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Ethiopia: Repression Sets Stage for Non-Competitive Elections*, *supra* note 36.