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Amnesty International Urges President Obama to Speak Up About Repression, Human Rights Abuses in Ethiopia When He Meets Prime Minister Zenawi

Amnesty International today urged President Barack Obama and fellow G8 leaders to speak up about Ethiopia's appalling human rights record when he and the group meets with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi at Camp David on Saturday, May 19. The human rights organization said Zenawi should not receive a "free pass" on rights abuses during meetings on food security.

Zenawi will join the leaders of Benin, Ghana and Tanzania for a discussion with G8 leaders on food security, and Amnesty International said the meeting presents the Obama administration with an opportunity to urge Zenawi to put a stop to repressive laws in the Horn of African country.

While Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch applaud the summit leaders for addressing the important issue of food security, President Obama and fellow G8 members must use this opportunity to tell Prime Minister Zenawi that human rights are equally as crucial. The Zenawi government's ongoing clampdown on political dissent in Ethiopia cannot be ignored. The U.S. government must urge Mr. Zenawi to end the abusive tactics that undermine the work of journalists and activists and instill fear in ordinary citizens.

Prime Minister Zenawi is greeted with open arms around the world for the progress his government claims they have made on economic growth, development and counter-terrorism. But while he is warmly welcomed during his travels, at home the people of Ethiopia are subjected to ever increasing restrictions on their basic rights. In the year since the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, the Ethiopian government has shown particular fear of popular protests breaking out and has arrested scores of opposition members and independent journalists because they dared to criticize the government or call for peaceful protests.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPDRF) has ruled for more than two decades. Zenawi's government has systematically attempted to crush dissent in the country by jailing opposition members and journalists, firing on unarmed protesters, and using state resources to undermine political opposition.

Repression of freedom of expression has increased alarmingly in recent years. In 2009, the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation gave the government a wide range of resources to counter "terrorist activity," which, among other concerns, made the publication of statements likely to be understood as encouraging terrorist acts punishable by 10 to 20 years in prison.

In 2011, several journalists were jailed under the broad law, including Swedish journalists Martin Schibbye and Johan Persson, who entered the country to report on the ongoing conflict in the Somali region. The two were convicted of terrorism activity and are currently serving an 11 year prison sentence.

Dissident journalist Eskinder Nega, this year's winner of the prestigious PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, is still on trial for terrorism and treason charges after criticizing the government and calling for reform and increased press freedom.

Eskinder Nega's case should be a glaring example to the G8 leaders of why Zenawi's government cannot be given a free pass at this summit. Nega is in jail for no other reason than daring to do his work as a journalist.

2009 also saw the institution of the Charities and Societies Proclamation, which has severely limited the ability of human rights organizations to conduct their work by denying human rights organizations access to essential funding and disrupting internal operations. Organizations have been forced to lay off staff and cut crucial programs, allowing the government to further curtail human rights. The law has been used to freeze more than \$1 million in assets of the country's two leading human rights organizations.

In 2008, the last year before the law was passed, the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), the country's leading women's rights organization, provided free legal aid to over 17,000 women in addition to other activities tens of thousands of participants benefited from. Today, EWLA is barely functioning, with limited legal aid for women provided by volunteers.

The Zenawi government has engaged in repeated electoral corruption and repression. Nearly 200 protesters were killed after security forces opened fire on a crowd in Addis Ababa following the 2005 parliamentary elections in which the opposition accused the ruling party of falsifying results. After state resources were used extensively to crush opposition parties in the run up to the 2010 elections, Zenawi's party claimed victory with 99.6 percent of the vote.

The impact of the oppressive laws has led to a breakdown of civil society, allowing Zenawi to consolidate power and rule by fear.

Amnesty International is a Nobel Peace Prize-winning grassroots activist organization with more than 3 million supporters, activists and volunteers in more than 150 countries campaigning for human rights worldwide. The organization investigates and exposes abuses, educates and mobilizes the public, and works to protect people wherever justice, freedom, truth and dignity are denied.