

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/ethiopie-in-disgraceful-verdict-court-21-12-2011,41586.html>

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Africa - Ethiopia

ETHIOPIA

## Two Swedish journalists sentenced to 11 years in prison

27 December 2011

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**Johan Persson** and **Martin Schibbye**, the two Swedish journalists who were convicted by an Addis Ababa court on 21 December on charges of entering the country illegally and supporting terrorism, were sentenced today to 11 years in prison. "This sentence should satisfy the goal of peace and stability," Judge Shemsu Sirgaga said.

Defence lawyer Abebe Balcha said he could not accept the sentence and would consult with his clients about the possibility of an appeal.

"What are the Ethiopian authorities hoping to achieve?" the Reporters Without Borders international secretariat asked. "To discourage anyone from visiting the Ogaden, as these two journalists did. To send a warning signal to the national and international media about the danger of receiving a long jail sentence on a terrorism charge if they attempt any potentially embarrassing investigative reporting."

Jesper Bengtsson, the president of Reporters Without Borders' Swedish section, added: "We regard this sentence as deplorable even if it did not surprise us after last week's decision by the court to find them guilty."

A Reporters Without Borders delegation consisting of secretary-general Jean-François Julliard and the head of the Africa desk, Ambroise Pierre, met with the Ethiopian ambassador in Paris, Teshome Toga, on 22 December, the day after the two journalists were convicted.

They voiced their disapproval of the way the Ethiopian judicial system was handling the case and warned of the danger of serious diplomatic repercussions if Persson and Schibbye were given long jail sentences.

"Every meeting between Ethiopian officials and their European or western counterparts will henceforth be affected by this case," Julliard warned. "You will hear references to Johan and Martin every day. You will be criticized every day. There will be a big campaign on their behalf."

[More information about Persson and Schibbye here.](#)

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### 21.12.11 - In disgraceful verdict, court convicts Swedish journalists of supporting terrorism

Reporters Without Borders is outraged that an Addis Ababa court today found Swedish journalists **Johan Persson** and **Martin Schibbye** guilty of supporting terrorism, a charge for which the prosecution has requested a 13-year jail sentence. They are also facing an additional sentence of five and a half years in prison on a charge of entering the country illegally, to which they pleaded guilty. The court is expected to issue a sentence next week.

The presiding judge, Shemsu Sirgaga, said: "They have shown that they are esteemed journalists, but we cannot conclude that someone with a good reputation does not engage in criminal acts. They have not been able to prove that they did not support terrorism."

"This verdict is absurd and demonstrates the stubbornness of the Ethiopian authorities," Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Jean-François Julliard said. "Instead of proving

their guilt, the judge accuses them of failing to prove their innocence. This is back-to-front. Since the first day of the trial, the defence position has been very clear: Persson and Schibbye entered the Ogaden illegally for the purposes of reporting, but they never supported terrorism.”

Jesper Bengtsson, the president of the Swedish section of Reporters Without Borders, said: “The Swedish government must step up its efforts on behalf of Johan and Martin. The quiet diplomacy that foreign minister Carl Bildt has been relying on until now has not worked. Bildt must demand their immediate release.”

Reporters Without Borders wrote yesterday to the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, Ben Emmersson, to condemn the misuse of counter-terrorism in Ethiopia and to urge him to meet with representatives of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi’s government to convince them to stop using counter-terrorism as grounds for suppressing freedom of expression. [More information here.](#)

Reporters Without Borders also joined three other NGOs and the “Free Johan Persson and Martin Schibbye” campaign in issuing [a combined appeal yesterday to the European Union to be more active and determined in defending media freedom in Ethiopia.](#)

Persson, a photographer, and Schibbye, a reporter, were arrested on 1 July after entering Ethiopia’s southeastern Ogaden region from Somalia with members of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), an armed separatist group, with the aim of covering human rights abuses in the region for the [Kontinent](#) news agency. Shortly before their arrest, they were injured in a clash between government forces and the ONLF in which 15 ONLF members were killed.

When they appeared in court for the first time on 6 September, two months after their arrest, they were charged with “terrorist activities (...) supporting terrorists and providing them with professional aid [and] “entering a sovereign country without a valid visa or legal authorization,” [government spokesman Shimeles Kemal told Bloomberg.](#)

During the 6 September hearing, the prosecutor screened a propaganda video in support of the charges. The video, which showed the two journalists holding guns, had been posted on the pro-government [Caakara News](#) website a few days after their arrest. The defence strongly objected to the fact that sounds of shooting had been added to the soundtrack.

After the trial opened on 18 October, the charge of “participating in terrorism” was dropped on 3 November but the other two charges, supporting a terrorist group and entering the country illegally, were maintained.

Photo of Martin Schibbye and Johan Persson.

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