



Congressman Donald Payne

Tenth District - New Jersey

For Immediate Release

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Congressman Donald M. Payne Condemns Continued Harassment of Human Rights Advocates in Ethiopia and Calls for the Immediate Release of the Ethiopia Commission of Inquiry Report

On Thursday October 19, Yalemzewd Bekele, 29, a human rights advocate, was arrested near the Kenyan border by Ethiopian security, while on her way to Kenya fleeing persecution.. In August 2006, during a visit to Ethiopia my delegation talked to Yalemzewd but was unable to meet with her face to face because of security concerns. Yalemzewd, who works for the European Commission in Addis found out late last week that a decision was made to arrest her. She decided to stay in her office to avoid arrest. After several days, she was asked by a senior EC official to leave the office.

Yalemzewd was betrayed by her own employer. Instead of protecting her, this official ruined her life. I strongly condemn this act and call on the European Commission to investigate this decision. Yalemzewd is in a detention center in Moyale, a small town near the Kenyan border. Alemayehu Fantu was also arrested on October 5. He was visibly tortured when he appeared in court on October 12, 2006 and may have been coerced into naming Ms. Bekele. Conditions in Ethiopia are going from bad to worse. Ethiopians are living in fear and they don't know what to expect tomorrow, a true reminder of the torturous past. Under the circumstances there is enough indication that Ms. Bekele may be harmed while in detention. I call for the immediate release of these political prisoners.

For over a year, I constantly argued that the Ethiopian government used excessive force against innocent civilians. Many innocent civilians lost their lives. Parliament established a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the killings. The Commission interviewed dozens of people and spent months investigating and documenting what they saw and heard. When the time came to submit the report, parliament was adjourned a day early, denying the Commission the opportunity to present their findings. The decision was deliberate in order to force the Commission to change its findings. In August, I was told by a senior Ethiopian official that the Commission did not finish its work. After constant threat and harassment, the Chairman of the Commission and the Deputy Chair left the country with the report. Over the past week, a friend spoke to both the chair and deputy chairman of the Commission. They clearly stated that they "can not turn their backs on all those people who risked their lives to speak to us." They said "the truth must come out and Ethiopians must know what happened in June and November."

I have seen the reports and the video of the deliberation of the Commission. One can not question the quality of the work nor the authenticity of the documents. The faces of the Commissioners are clear to see and the message and conclusions loud and clear. The data presented in these reports and the videotaped testimony of the members of the Commission as they cast their votes further reveals the degree to which a systematic crackdown was in place. I repeatedly stated

then and the Commission agrees that the Government used excessive force against civilians in June and November. I said then and I repeat again, those who gave the orders and those who carried out the order must be held accountable for this unspeakable crime.

The commission finally voted 8-2 that indeed excessive force was used. The committee chairman, Supreme Court Judge Frehiwot Samuel, stated that “many people were killed arbitrarily.” He stated further that “Old men were killed while in their homes, and children were also victims of the attack while playing in the garden.” An Ethiopian Orthodox priest, Estatiose Gebrekristos, was recorded as saying, "based on my eyes, ears and knowledge the actions taken were 100 percent wrong." We must never forget the victims. These are just a handful of the many who perished last year. Mathewos Girma, 14; Qasim Ali, 21; Legesse Tulu, 60; Tamam Muktar, 25; Etenesh Yimam, 50; Worke Abebe, 19; Debela Oliqa Guta, 15; Hassan Dula, 65. Etenesh Yimam was killed in her home in front of her family for simply asking why they are arresting her husband, who was elected in May. Etenesh is dead, her husband in prison, and her daughter in hiding somewhere in Africa. This is the more reason why we should pass H.R. 5680, Ethiopia Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights Advancement Act of 2006.