

Opening Statement
Joint Hearing: Is There a Human Rights Double Standard? U.S. Policy Toward
Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia
May 10, 2007
Mr. Donald M. Payne

I would like to thank Chairman Delahunt for initiating this joint hearing examining the administration's human rights policies towards Ethiopia and Equatorial Guinea. The policies bear careful examination, and I am glad that we are doing so.

I have two concerns related to our support for human rights and democracy in these two countries.

The first is that our rhetoric is not living up to reality in terms of the policies we pursue. The Bush Administration has talked a good game when it comes to human rights and democracy in the world, but it is clear to me that those issues become much less important when there are other perceived interests at stake.

The President stated in his State of the Union Address in 2006 that, "Dictatorships shelter terrorists, and feed resentment and radicalism, and seek weapons of mass destruction. Democracies replace resentment with hope, respect the rights of their citizens and their neighbors, and join the fight against terror. Every step toward freedom in the world makes our country safer, and so we will act boldly in freedom's cause."

The statement sounds great. But there is not enough follow through supporting what the president has said when it comes to Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia.

Almost exactly a year ago, Secretary of State Rice welcomed President Teodore Obiang of Equatorial Guinea—one of Africa’s longest standing dictators—to the United States with open arms and called him our “good friend”. That was certainly a bold statement, but I hope it is not what the President had in mind when he referred to bold actions.

The State Department itself indicates that human rights violations in Equatorial Guinea are common, and include “abridgement of citizens' right to change their government; torture, beating, and other physical abuse of prisoners and detainees by security forces... arbitrary arrest, detention, and incommunicado detention... judicial corruption and lack of due process... severe restrictions on freedom of speech and of the press; restrictions on the right of assembly, association, and movement; [and] government corruption.

Secretary Rice’s warm welcome of President Obiang came on the heels of an agreement by the United States Agency of International Development to provide technical assistance for the Government of Equatorial Guinea to administer a social needs fund.

I am all for the government of Equatorial Guinea spending some of its billions on its own people. My question, again, is whether putting the credibility of the U.S. government on the line in support of a regime led by a man who took power through a coup in 1979 and who has never stood for free elections is a “bold act in freedom’s cause,” to use the words of the President.

Likewise our policies in support of democracy and human rights in Ethiopia require a degree of scrutiny. Nearly a hundred people were killed and thousands were arrested by the government in June and November of 2005 when they took to the streets to protest the results of the May 2005 elections.

While many of those detained were released a short time later, an unknown number remain in prison, including opposition politicians and members of civil society. The newly elected Mayor of Addis Ababa and others are charged with crimes that could carry the death penalty.

We continue to provide military assistance to the government of Ethiopia, while failing to take a consistent outspoken stance in support of democracy and human rights at the highest levels of our government. This is part of the reason that the administration had no—I repeat *no*—credibility when it claimed that it did not support the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia.

My second concern is that we are repeating the mistakes of the past. At various points in our history, the United States has supported Africa's most oppressive regimes because it met our short term interests at the time. We gave resources and provided security assistance to despots such as Samuel Doe of Liberia, Mobutu Sese Seku of Zaire, and Said Barre [sigh ED BAR ay] of Somalia to name a few.

Our support sowed the seeds of conflict and chaos in these countries that they still have not fully recovered from. To this day Somalia has no functioning government. The Democratic Republic of Congo is improving, but is on shaky ground. Of the three, only Liberia has really turned the corner.

Actions speak louder than words. If we say we support democracy and human rights, but fail to send strong messages regarding these issues, it undercuts our cause. I have taken action. I have introduced H.R. 2003, the Ethiopia Democracy and Accountability Act of 2007 to support the consolidation of peace and security, and respect for human rights and democracy in Ethiopia.

I would like to see strong concrete action on a consistent and sustained basis by the administration related to human rights and democracy to both Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.