

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 20, 2004

Honorable Ambassador Kassahun Ayele
Embassy of Ethiopia
3506 International Dr. NW
Washington, DC 20008

Dear Ambassador Ayele,

We are writing to express our concern over the Ethiopian government's decision to suspend the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists' Association (EFJA), an organization that champions an independent and free press. As Members of the U.S. House of Representatives, we urge the Ethiopian government to allow this organization to operate freely.

As you know, the EFJA unites Ethiopian journalists behind a common goal: preserving freedom of the press in Ethiopia. Consistent with this goal, the association strongly criticized the government's 2003 Draft Press Law that would impede the ability of the press to operate freely. On November 10, 2003, reports indicate that the EFJA was ordered to suspend its activities by the Ethiopian Justice Ministry under the pretense that the EFJA had failed to renew its license. In fact, the EFJA had operated for three years without a license, and is not required under Ethiopian law to register with the Ministry of Justice.

In response to the actions taken by the Ethiopian government, the world community has voiced its support for the EFJA. The World Association of Newspapers, consisting of seven international press associations, condemned the suspension of the EFJA and called for its immediate reinstatement. Several international press organizations-including the International Press Institute, World Association of Newspapers, and World Press Freedom Committee-have passed resolutions calling for the reinstatement of the EFJA. These organizations, like so many others around the world, have concluded that the government's decision to suspend the unlicensed EFJA was merely a pretext for punishing one of its most vocal critics on the Draft Press Law.

The EFJA's suspension is even more alarming when considered in its context. The government's crackdown of EFJA is not an isolated incident, but the most recent in a disturbing trend by the Ethiopian government to suppress the nation's print media. In 2001, for example, the Ethiopian government under Prime Minister Meles Zenawi imprisoned more journalists than any other country on the African continent. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) documents the latest infringement of free speech in its 67th Special Report condemning the harassment and assault of a journalist, Ato Araya Tesfa Mariam, by government security forces.

While the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) has made extraordinary strides towards establishing democracy in Ethiopia, the rights enjoyed by the press are circumscribed. Freedom of the press to operate independent of government influence is vital to any democracy. Accordingly, the framers of the FDRE Constitution acknowledged the importance of free speech by stating in Article 29 "everyone has the right to freedom of expression without interference." This right remains hollow given the government's suspension of the EFJA.

We, therefore, urge your government to reconsider the suspension of the EFJA and reaffirm its commitment to the freedom of the press. We thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this matter, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Hon. Michael M. Honda
Member of Congress

Hon. Zoe Lofgren
Member of Congress

Hon. Sheila Jackson-Lee
Member of Congress

Hon. Donald Payne
Member of Congress

Hon. Martin Frost
Member of Congress

Hon. Barney Frank
Member of Congress

Hon. Eddie Bernice Johnson
Member of Congress

Hon. Bernard Sanders
Member of Congress

Hon. Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

Hon. Bob Filner
Member of Congress

Hon. Lane Evans
Member of Congress

Hon. Gregory Meeks
Member of Congress