

EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK

Oral intervention

On the occasion of the 49th ordinary session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Banjul, The Gambia – Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders in Africa.

Presented by Hassan Shire Sheikh, East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project

Honorable Chairperson, commissioners, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project, I would like to start by thanking the commissioner for her excellent work for the rights of human rights defenders in Africa. Over the past six months, we have documented threats and attacks against human rights defenders across the sub-region, and in particular would like to encourage the special rapporteur to consider the challenges faced recently in Ethiopia and Sudan.

The independent media in Ethiopia continues to face attacks and restrictions, as well as practical difficulties such as increased printing costs. Two independent newspapers have survived. One, Fitih, is a very small newspaper, publishing only 1500 copies per week. The editor Temesgen Desalegne was summoned by police on 22nd January and accused of 'tarnishing the image of the ruling coalition'. While he was later released, he was required to pay a bail of 500 USD. The other newspaper, Awramba Times, currently self-censors much of its content, in an attempt to avoid further charges. The paper has previously been harassed by government for its critical reporting.

At the beginning of April 2011, the Ethiopian government jammed the transmission of Deutsche Welle, a German broadcast station, after the station aired a program in which the participants said the government feared that an uprising like the ones in North Africa could also take place in Ethiopia. This is not the first time that the government has jammed international radio stations broadcasting in Ethiopia; two months before the May 2010 elections, Voice of America had its signal jammed.

On 11th February 2011, Eskinder Nega, a journalist was arrested by the Federal Police as he left an internet café, after he published an article referring to the protests in Egypt. The article urged that if protests did break out in Ethiopia, the army should acknowledge Ethiopians' right to peacefully demonstrate, and should protect them. He was accused of attempting to incite the public into similar protests.

Addis Neger, an independent newspaper that closed down after significant surveillance by security services and a smear campaign accusing the newspaper and its staff of supporting terrorist groups, has since been re-established in exile. However the newspaper has been blocked in Ethiopia on numerous occasions, most recently in March 2011. On May 2, the Committee to Protect Journalists named Ethiopia as one of ten worst oppressors of internet freedom.

In Sudan, attacks on freedom of expression and the press that were prevalent during the elections in April 2010 continue to date and newspaper censorship has resumed. Freedom of expression and

freedom of association are protected by the Interim National Constitution (INC) of 2005, but significant restrictions and attacks on these rights continue to take place.

The response to demonstrations organized by the Youth for 30 January Change Alliance, sparked by the protests that have recently taken place in North Africa, were disproportionate. Armed riot police used water pipes, sticks and teargas to disperse the protestors. The demonstrations continued into a second week and the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) treatment of the detained protesters worsened, with the use of sleep deprivation electric shocks.

Following the January demonstrations, nine journalists who reported on them were arrested. Four have since been released, but four newspapers have also been censored since the protests: Ajas Alhurria, Al Sahafa, Al Alyoum, and now Al-Midan. Newspapers also had their distribution banned after they covered the demonstrations or the copies confiscated.

We therefore call on the Commission to:

- Recall to Ethiopian and Sudanese authorities their responsibilities towards human rights defenders ;
- Call on the Ethiopian and Sudanese authorities to immediately end attacks on defenders- notably incidences of judicial harassment, threats and arbitrary arrests and detentions ; and to ensure that individuals responsible for attacks on defenders are held to account ;
- Call on the authorities to offer a standing invitation to the special procedures of the commission, notably the Special Rapporteur on HRDs.

We would also like to encourage the Commissioner to:

- Pay particular attention to the situation of HRDs in Ethiopia and Sudan;
- Organise a formal or informal visit to Ethiopia and Sudan without undue delay;
- Collaborate with the UN Independent Expert on Sudan.