

EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK

Oral intervention on the report of Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information

51st Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

Presented by Sari Naskinen, East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project

Honorable Chairperson, commissioners, distinguished delegates,

The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network would like to thank the honorable commissioner for her valuable work on access to information and freedom of expression in Africa, especially as regards the safety of journalists in light of the important role they play in the promotion and protection of human rights.

EHAHRD-Net is deeply concerned about the range of challenges faced by media groups and media workers on the continent. In the past five months, five journalists have been killed in targeted assassinations in Somalia, in and outside of Mogadishu. In Uganda, numerous journalists have been injured or beaten by police while covering the opposition demonstrations. In the context of peaceful protests, effective and proportionate policing is essential to ensure the freedoms of assembly, association, expression and access to information, as well as to maintain public order and the safety of all demonstrators, state officials, observers and the general public. In cases of targeted attacks on journalists, EHAHRD-Net calls on the Commission to support calls for independent, impartial and timely investigations and prosecutions at the national level. We thank the Special Rapporteur for her communication to the Government of the Republic of Somalia in this regard.

In addition to physical assaults on journalists, EHAHRD-Net is concerned by attempts to silence journalists and other voices who raise critical issues. In Ethiopia, for example, several journalists are among 24 defendants on trial charged with supporting a terrorist group. One of the accused, Eskinder Nega, had written an article online shortly before his arrest criticising the government's use of the anti-terrorism law to suppress dissent.

In Eritrea, at least 32 journalists are currently thought to be in detention. It has been reported that Yirgalem Fisseha Mebrahtu, who has been in detention since her arrest in February 2009, was admitted to Halibet hospital in Asmara in January 2012 in a serious condition. She had previously been admitted to the hospital in November 2011. Mebrahtu is under permanent guard and is not allowed visitors. Her family and friends have not been told of the nature of her illness but her treatment requires the purchase of medication abroad. Madame Chair, EHAHRD-Net calls on the Government of Eritrea to keep Mebrahtu's family informed on her situation, and to provide information on all the journalists in detention. All prisoners in detention in Eritrea, including the journalists, should be charged or released. EHAHRD-Net encourages the Commission to follow up on its decision of 2007 on the case of at least 18 journalists held incommunicado since 2001 to be

given access to their lawyers, and for the Government of Eritrea to respect and implement the Commission's decision.

Madame Chair, to conclude, EHAHRD-Net recommends that the Commission calls on all States to uphold press freedoms and create an enabling environment for journalists to undertake their legitimate work in safety. In particular, we call on the Special Rapporteur to consider a visit to Ethiopia and Eritrea, and call on those governments to extend an invitation for a visit to the Special Rapporteur.

I thank you.