

## Ethiopia

The Ethiopian government's human rights record remains poor, marked by an ever-hardening intolerance towards meaningful political dissent or independent criticism. Ethiopian military forces have continued to commit war crimes and other serious abuses with impunity in the course of counterinsurgency campaigns in Ethiopia's eastern Somali Region and in neighboring Somalia.

Local-level elections in April 2008 provided a stark illustration of the extent to which the government has successfully crippled organized opposition of any kind—the ruling party and its affiliates won more than 99 percent of all constituencies, and the vast majority of seats were uncontested. In 2008 the government launched a direct assault on civil society by introducing legislation that would criminalize most independent human rights work and subject NGOs to pervasive interference and control.

### Political Repression

The limited opening of political space that preceded Ethiopia's 2005 elections has been entirely reversed. Government opponents and ordinary citizens alike face repression that discourages and punishes free expression and political activity. Ethiopian government officials regularly subject government critics or perceived opponents to harassment, arrest, and even torture, often reflexively accusing them of membership in "anti-peace" or "anti-people" organizations. Farmers who criticize local leaders face threats of losing vital agricultural inputs such as fertilizer or the selective enforcement of debts owed to the state. The net result is that in most of Ethiopia, and especially in the rural areas where the overwhelming majority of the population lives, there is no organized opposition to the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

The local-level elections in April 2008 were for *kebele* and *wereda* administrations, which provide essential government services and humanitarian assistance, and are often the institutions used to directly implement repressive government policies. In the vast majority of constituencies there were no opposition candidates at all, and candidates aligned with the EPRDF won more than 99 percent of all available seats.

Where opposition candidates did contest they faced abuse and improper procedural obstacles to registration. Candidates in Ethiopia's Oromia region were detained, threatened with violence by local officials, and accused of affiliation to the rebel Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Oromia, Ethiopia's most populous region, has long suffered from heavy-handed government repression, with students, activists, or critics of rural administrations regularly accused of being OLF operatives. Such allegations often lead to arbitrary imprisonment and torture.

### **War Crimes and Other Abuses by Ethiopian Military Forces**

Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) personnel stationed in Mogadishu continued in 2008 to use mortars, artillery, and "Katyusha" rockets indiscriminately in response to insurgent attacks, devastating entire neighborhoods of the city. Insurgent attacks often originate in populated areas, prompting Ethiopian bombardment of civilian homes and public spaces, sometimes wiping out entire families. Many of these attacks constitute war crimes. In July ENDF forces bombarded part of the strategic town of Beletweyne after coming under attack by insurgent forces based there, displacing as many as 75,000 people.

2008 was also marked by the proliferation of other violations of the laws of war by ENDF personnel in Somalia. Until late 2007, Ethiopian forces were reportedly reasonably disciplined and restrained in their day-to-day interactions with Somali civilians in Mogadishu. However, throughout 2008 ENDF forces in Mogadishu participated in widespread acts of murder, rape, assault, and looting targeting ordinary residents of the city, often alongside forces allied to the Somali Transitional Federal Government. In an April raid on a Mogadishu mosque ENDF soldiers reportedly killed 21 people; seven of the dead had their throats cut.

ENDF forces have also increasingly fired indiscriminately on crowds of civilians when they come under attack. In August ENDF soldiers were hit by a roadside bomb near the town of Afgooye and responded by firing wildly; in the resulting bloodbath as many as 60 civilians were shot and killed, including the passengers of two crowded minibuses.

In Ethiopia itself, the ENDF continues to wage a counterinsurgency campaign against the rebel Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in the country's restive Somali region. The scale and intensity of military operations seems to have declined from a peak in mid-2007, but arbitrary detentions, torture, and other abuses continue. Credible reports indicate that vital food aid to the drought-affected region has been diverted and misused as a weapon to starve out rebel-held areas. The military continues to severely restrict access to conflict-affected regions and the Ethiopian government has not reversed its decision to evict the International Committee of the Red Cross from the region in July 2007.

The Ethiopian government denies all allegations of abuses by its military and refuses to facilitate independent investigations. There have been no serious efforts to investigate or ensure accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Somali Region and in neighboring Somalia in 2007 and 2008. Nor have ENDF officers or civilian officials been held accountable for crimes against humanity that ENDF forces carried out against ethnic Anuak communities during a counterinsurgency campaign in Gambella region in late 2003 and 2004.

## **Regional Renditions**

In early 2007 at least 90 men, women, and children from 18 different countries fleeing conflict in Somalia were arrested in Kenya and subsequently deported to Somalia and then Ethiopia, where many were interrogated by US intelligence agents. An unknown number of people arrested by Ethiopian forces in Somalia were also directly transferred to Ethiopia. Many of the victims of these "regional renditions" were released in mid-2007 and early 2008, but at least two men, including a Kenyan and a Canadian national, remain in Ethiopian detention almost two years after their deportation from Kenya. The whereabouts and fate of at least 22 others rendered to

Ethiopia, including Eritreans, Somalis, and Ethiopian Ogadeni and Oromo, is unknown.

## **Civil Society and Free Expression**

The environment for civil society continues to deteriorate. In 2008 the government announced new legislation—the Charities and Societies Proclamation—which purports to provide greater oversight and transparency on civil society activities. In fact, the law would undermine the independence of civil society and criminalizes the work of many human rights organizations. At this writing, the law looked set to be introduced to parliament.

Alongside a complex and onerous system of government surveillance and control, the law would place sharp restrictions on the kinds of work permissible to foreign organizations and Ethiopian civil society groups that receive some foreign funding—barring such organizations from any kind of work touching on human rights issues. Individuals who fail to comply with the law’s Byzantine provisions could face criminal prosecution.

A new media law passed in July promises to reform some of the most repressive aspects of the previous legal framework. Most notably, the law eliminates the practice of pretrial detention for journalists—although in August, the prominent editor of the Addis Ababa-based *Reporter* newspaper was imprisoned without charge for several days in connection with a story printed in the paper. In spite of its positive aspects, the law remains flawed—it grants the government significant leeway to restrain free speech, including by summarily impounding publications on grounds of national security or public order. The law also retains criminal penalties including prison terms for journalists found guilty of libel or defamation.

In March 2008 civil society activists Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie were released from more than two years of incarceration, but only after the Ethiopian Federal High Court convicted them of “incitement” related to the 2005 elections.

## Key International Actors

The United States and European donor states provide the Ethiopian government with large sums of bilateral assistance, including direct budgetary support from the United Kingdom and military assistance from the US. The US is Ethiopia's largest bilateral donor and has also provided logistical and political support for Ethiopia's protracted intervention in Somalia, and provides bilateral assistance to the Ethiopian military. Donor governments view Ethiopia as an important ally in an unstable region and, in the case of the US, in the "global war on terror."

The US, UK, and other key donors and political allies have consistently refused to publicly criticize widespread abuses or to demand meaningful improvements in Ethiopia's human rights record. The sole exception in 2008 lay in donor government efforts to lobby against the repressive civil society legislation introduced by the government. No major donor made any significant effort to raise serious concerns about or demand a concrete response to war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ethiopia or ENDF atrocities in Somalia.

Ethiopia remains deadlocked over a boundary dispute with Eritrea dating from the two countries' 1998-2000 war. The war in Somalia is another source of tension between the two countries, with Eritrea backing and hosting one faction of the insurgency Ethiopian troops are fighting against in Somalia. Eritrea also plays host to other Ethiopian rebel movements, notably the OLF and ONLF, with the aim of destabilizing the Ethiopian government.

China's importance as a trading partner to Ethiopia grows year by year. According to official figures Chinese investment in Ethiopia totals more than US\$350 million annually, up from just \$10 million in 2003.

Ethiopia is due to be reviewed under the Universal Periodic Review mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council in December 2009.