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CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

December 23, 2015

The Honorable John F. Kerry  
Secretary of State  
United States Department of State  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

We are writing in regards to the recent student protests in the Oromia region of Ethiopia that have erupted in response to the Ethiopian government's Master Plan to expand Addis Ababa into surrounding farmland. Minnesota is home to the largest Oromo population in the United States and we have been contacted by hundreds of constituents concerned about the violence and intimidation these protesters have faced from government security forces. We would like to commend you for condemning the recent killings and violence against peaceful Oromo protesters. However, our constituents feel that stronger action is required to address the deteriorating human rights situation in the region.

The United States and Ethiopia have shared a long, fruitful relationship and are partners on a number of issues important to the region. This ongoing relationship, coupled with the extensive foreign assistance that the United States provides Ethiopia each year, should be used to leverage the United States' position that inclusive democracy be practiced in Ethiopia.


Numerous reports from organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Committee on the Protection of Journalists have revealed the growing practice of government security forces using arbitrary arrests and prosecution to silence journalists and Ethiopian citizens who are simply exercising freedom of expression—a fundamental right and the cornerstone of a democratic society. These individuals are often charged under the draconian 2009 anti-terrorism proclamation. The continued mistreatment and displacement of the Oromo ethnic group in the Oromia region is especially troubling. Furthermore, the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law), enacted in 2009, has made it nearly impossible for non-profits to operate in Ethiopia.


Similar protests last year left dozens of Oromos dead and hundreds arrested. This year, there have already been five officially recorded deaths, although constituents close to the issue have informed us the true number of deaths is much higher with a death toll of at least 75. Recently, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn said that authorities “will take merciless legitimate action against any force bent on destabilizing the area.” This aggressive approach to peaceful protesters is cause for major concern by the United States and we therefore urge you to engage the Ethiopian leadership in a serious dialogue in order to prevent further loss of life and to ensure that Ethiopia is adhering to democratic principles.


The United States Congress has already sent a strong message regarding Ethiopia’s response to protests. The 2015 Omnibus Appropriations Bill has provisions to ensure that the U.S. funding to Ethiopia cannot be used to support forced evictions in the country. Furthermore, the bill requires U.S. assistance to be used to support local community initiatives aimed at improving livelihoods and be subject to prior consultation with affected populations. The bill also opposes U.S. funding to international financial institutions such as the World Bank for programs that could lead to forced evictions in Ethiopia.

We respectfully ask you to conduct a full, thorough review of this ongoing situation. We cannot look the other way when our allies are violating the human rights of their citizens. If during your investigation you find violations of the Leahy Law, we ask that you respond by taking appropriate action. Thank you for your attention to this important human rights matter.

Sincerely,

  
Keith Ellison  
Member of Congress

  
Betty McCollum  
Member of Congress

  
Tom Emmer  
Member of Congress

Cc: Susan Rice, National Security Advisor, White House  
Samantha Power, United States Ambassador to United Nations  
Congressman Ed Royce, Chairman of Foreign Affairs Committee, United States House  
of Representatives  
Congressman Elliot Engel, Ranking member of Foreign Affairs Committee, United States  
House of Representatives