

# Another flawed, recycled “Human Right report” on Ethiopia from the State Dept

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(Bayelegne Yirgu)

There has been a time, years ago, that the Ethiopian government used to denounce and disprove in detail allegations made by the annual State Department Report on Human Rights and Practices which covers almost 200 countries around the world.

But that is a distant memory. It seems as if Ethiopia's officials stopped reading the reports. If one searches on google, the last time the Ethiopian government responded was in 2011 and it was just a short letter that says:

*“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia has thoroughly examined the Report on Ethiopia. It regrets that once again over 80% of the publication reproduces, almost verbatim, claims contained in previous reports. Not for the first time, the Report narrates groundless and unverifiable allegations and repeats the same politically motivated accusations obtained from dubious sources. The report refers to these as “reliable” and “credible” but ironically, it also identifies many of them as “violent movements” and “opposition sources”.*

*There are some newly added entries but these, too, are also a compilation of fabricated stories, misleading judgments, and claims invented by opposition elements with known motives. In*

*the spirit of “telling a lie often enough will make people in the end believe it”, opposition networks are quick to see the State Department’s annual report as a vehicle to tarnish Ethiopia’s image. Some of the entries also find their way into the reports of “advocacy” networks such as Human Rights Watch, always quick to pickup anything detrimental to Ethiopia.”*

Indeed, that letter can serve as a permanent reply until the State Dept improves the way it compiles its annual report on Ethiopia.

If you had read a report published in any given year, you can not read the next year's report with out wondering whether you are reading the same report for a second time.

It is understandable that the government chose not to waste the time of the leadership and experts by writing reply to recycled reports every year.

Moreover, it is doubtful if the State Dept will improve its reports' quality. As one can observe from a note on the State Dept. website, the underlying premises are fundamentally flawed. The note states the objective of the report as following:

*“although foreign governments and global civil society cannot impose change from outside, we can and should encourage and provide support to members of local civil society and other peaceful change agents within each country.*

*As part of such efforts, these reports can and often do amplify these voices, by making reference to their findings, publicly reinforcing their concerns, and by widely disseminating this*

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*information to opinion makers, both internationally and within affected countries.”*

However, foreigners and even some Ethiopians may get confused since the State Dept report is widely available on the internet. Unlike the wealthy government of United States, Ethiopia's government has few resources which are busy on tasks relevant to fighting poverty.

It is up-to concerned citizens, such as you and me, to give testimony of the reality on the ground, expose baseless claims and show flaws often characterize such publications, thereby improve our country's image. But this task can not be accomplished by a single person.

Therefore, I will only limit myself to highlighting some, not all, of the flaws of the State Department Report 2012, which was published last month. [the following review/presentation is in order of their appearance in the report]

1/ The main characteristic of any well-written report is that it doesn't miss atleast basic, uncontested facts and also demonstrates accurate presentation and internal consistency. The State Dept. report fails on that countless times.

For example: At the beginning, it misrepresents the citizen police (who are customarily called militia) who assist the regular police. These rural “militias” are voluntary recruits and subject to regular public evaluation/consultations meetings of the local population.

The authors of the State Dept. appear to have missed all this. They refereed to them as “regional government-backed militia”, as if they are paramilitary forces independent of the government. They stress this

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perception claiming the militias are loosely coordinated – missing their voluntary nature.

At one page, the report positively notes that the chiefs of the police and the military are civilians. On another page, it complains these militias are under EPRDF appointees. It is confusing what the authors of the report had in mind. If the militias are to be under civilian bosses, those bosses will probably be members of the ruling party.

Isn't it the same in most American states with the appointment of Das and police chiefs?

2/ The report often fails from lack of clarity. For example, it says: *“Ethiopian security forces reportedly killed as many as six persons in retaliation for an April 28 attack by armed gunmen that killed at least five persons and injured numerous others at the Saudi Star compound in the Gambella Region”*.

It is not even clear where and when the alleged killing happened. Bizarrely, it calls it “retaliation” without indicating the identity of the dead. However, if you followed the terror attack on the Saudi Star farm, you will know the report is referring to the crackdown on the perpetrators of the crime.

The effort was conducted in coordination with the government of South Sudan and finally succeeded in apprehending those responsible for the attack. All this was missed to the authors of the report who failed to check whether their sources are telling the truth or misleading them.

3/ A similar vague claim is found on another page of the report. It claims: “On February 12, members of the Somali Region Special Police

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allegedly opened fire on a local assembly in the Ogaden area of the Somali Region, killing 20 persons. The villagers reportedly were gathered to discuss the murder of a village elder the previous day. Many others were detained during the same incident.”

The authors of the report do not even know that there is no place officially named Ogaden. It is an unofficial term used to indicate sometimes the whole Ethio-Somali region or sometimes the districts inhabited by Ogaden clan. Whichever the case, there are hundreds of Kebele units and thousands villages. To which is the report referring?

More importantly, Somali region is not NewYork city where a death of a village elder would be a concern of a random group of residents. The death of a clan members be death by a gathering of all adult members of the clan who functions as a traditional insurance for the family of the deceased.

Any other issue – including retaliation, reconciliation and compensation – will be determined by the clan chiefs who are also in charge of local government structures. Imagine the police shooting government officials.

With this in mind, one can be assume the “local assembly” referred by the report is a fiction by the ONLF which the report relayed without cross-checking. Otherwise, it must have been an extortion and recruitment by ONLF that the police foiled.

4/ The report further discredits itself when it relays the Eritrean dictator's fiction at one of its pages. The report said: *“Members of the ARDUF claimed responsibility for a January 18 attack on a group of foreign*

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*tourists in the Afar Region. The attack resulted in the deaths of five Europeans and the kidnapping of two Europeans and two Ethiopians.”*

This is a hogwash in its extreme form!

To begin with, the attack was conducted on January 16 not January 18.

Secondly, the report makes no mention of Eritrea, even-though every respectable analyst in the world knows the hostages were kept in Eritrea soil and ARDUF is a surrogate of Eritrea.

Moreover, on July 2011 the UN monitoring group for Somalia and Eritrea clearly stated that Eritrea is responsible for continued and widespread efforts at destabilization the Horn of Africa through “operations using proxy forces that fall under direct Eritrean command and control falsely flagged as domestic opposition groups, in violation of [UN Security Council] resolution”

It is a disgrace that the State Department presented this state terrorism by the Eritrea dictatorship in a manner that gives legitimacy to it and contrary to the position of the UN Security Council and the White House.

5/ The State Dept report gets even funnier. It claimed: *“The [Ethiopian] constitution and law prohibit such practices; however, there were numerous reports security officials tortured and otherwise abused detainees.”*

Ok. What is the basis to say that?

The State Dept. says: *“In 2010 the UN Committee Against Torture reported it was “deeply concerned” about...allegations” concerning “the*

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*routine use of torture” by police....against alleged terrorists, and alleged supporters of violent separatist groups like the ONLF and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).”*

Mind you. The 2010 UN Committee statement mentioned only “allegations”. How can a three year old allegation can be an evidence for a current allegation?

Secondly, when the State Dept report say “torture”, what does it actually mean? Does it include the torture techniques employed by the United States itself in the name of “enhanced interrogation techniques”?

The “Human rights record of the United States in 2012” published by China exposes United States' practice of torture as follows:

*“The U.S. army has for long detained foreigners illegally at the Guantanamo prison. By January 2012, 171 people were still held there, said an article posted on the website of Watching America on January 17, 2012. They were denied the rights accorded to prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions, and savagely tortured (www.watchingamerica, January 17, 2012). American authorities have revealed that, in order to obtain confessions, some of the few being tried (only in military courts) have been tortured by water-boarding more than 100 times or intimidated with semiautomatic weapons, power drills or threats to sexually assault their mothers, said an article posted on the website of the New York Times on June 24, 2012 (www.nytimes.com, June 24, 2012). Media reported that in September 2012, a 32-year-old Yemeni named Adnan Farhan Abdul Latif died at the*

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*Guantanamo Bay detention camp, the ninth to have died there while in custody. He had been held at the detention camp since it was established in January 2002, without being charged with any crime (abcnews.go.com). On January 23, 2012, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay spoke out against the failure by the U.S. to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility and to ensure accountability for serious violations - including torture - that took place there (www.un.org, January 23, 2012). A noted American wrote in an article that the American government's counter-terrorism policies "are now clearly violating at least 10 of the declaration's 30 articles, including the prohibition against 'cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment'".*

It is hypocritical that the State Dept report accuses without any verifiable claim the popular Ethiopian forces, who help the people nearby their camp (both in Ethiopia or when they are peace-keeping in Africa), by sharing their food, assisting in harvest gathering and the like. While there is plenty evidence its own forces have questionable records.

In fact, the State Dept report contradicts itself by admitting that: *"During the year the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) visited regional prisons throughout the country.....Regional authorities allowed government and NGO representatives to meet regularly with prisoners without third parties present. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) monitored federal and regional detention centers and interviewed prison officials and prisoners in response to allegations of widespread human rights abuses. The domestic NGO Justice For All-*

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*Prison Fellowship Ethiopia (JFA-PFE) was granted access to various prison and detention facilities.”*

Obviously, all these frequent, unfiltered and extensive visits didn't bring any evidence of mistreatment, let alone torture.

9/ The State Dept report gets annoying when you read more and more pages.

For example: It misleads its readers by saying that: *“a judge denied bail for Feteah editor in chief Temesgen Dessalegn due to concerns the defendant might continue to write articles offending the government if he was released.”*

The reality is that bail was denied because the court believed Temesgen intends to publish the writings that the Court banned on grounds of national security reasons rather than *“[he] continue to write articles”*. Temesgen was released after a week and he continues to write using several platforms. But the State Dept report wouldn't mention that.

10/ The State Dept report becomes sickeningly misleading if you continue reading it. It claims: *“The trial of the 28 Muslims identified with protests and one Muslim accused of accepting funds illegally from a foreign embassy was not fully open to family and supporters, although it was initially open to the press and diplomats.”*

Probably, some foreigner who doesn't know Ethiopia has one of the most liberal Constitutions in the world may think that the government simply shut-down the Courtroom.

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In actuality, it was simply a “closed chamber”. Courtrooms are closed to all except those concerned when there is a risk to public moral, national security and the like. Be it in Ethiopia or the United States.

In this case, the witness were under clear and undeniable danger from supporters of the defendants, any court in the world would have decided to see the case in close chambers.

Unfortunately, the authors of the State Dept report do not know this elementary legal procedure or they didn't want to inform their readers.

12/ The State Dept. report becomes ridiculous at some of its pages. It claimed: *”Domestic and international NGOs estimated there were up to 400 political prisoners and detainees at year’s end.”*

How many political prisoners? Three up to four hundred. What a ridiculous estimation!?

But this is an evidence that both the authors of the State Sept Report and its sources do not have any clear definition of “political prisoners”.

Since they don't have any clear definition, the section of the report on political prisoners includes people who were convicted as terrorists by all courts – from Federal First Instance Court to the Supreme Court of Ethiopia.

For example, the report cites the notorious Eskinder Nega in that category.

To begin with, Eskinder Nega is not a journalist. Ethiopia's Broadcasting Authority and Government Communication Office never registered him

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as journalist atleast since 2002. Secondly, Eskinder has never been a blogger.

To the contrary, he was a politician as recent as 2004/2005 holding a senior position - vice Chairman of the All Amahara Peoples' Organization (AAPO).

The AAPO led by Eskinder was a hardliner splinter group that remained behind when the majority of AAPO members, led by Engineer Hailu Shawel, decided to rename the party All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP).

Of course, Eskinder was a publisher of three tabloids until 2005. That is: Askual, Menelik and Satenaw. But those newspapers were not the kind that the authors of the State Dept would endorse if they tried to learn about their contents.

It is incomprehensible that the State Dept accuses the President of Iran for denying the Holocaust and advocating the destruction of the "Zionist state".

At the same time, they exalt Eskinder Nega, who published writings that laud the Holocaust without even bothering to differentiate between Zionism and Jewish.

However, since we know the historic ties and mutual bonds between the United States and Ethiopia, all we can say is that the authors of the State Dept report are out of touch with the issues they are talking about.

The State Dept report becomes more and more factually inaccurate as we continue reading.....[to be continued]

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