

## **Another flawed, recycled “Human Right report” on Ethiopia from the State Dept (Part II)**

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The State Department Report 2012, which was published last month. Is not worth responding.

As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in respinse to the previous year report, “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.”

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

Therefore. 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.

It is in that spirit that I started exposing the latest State Dept. Report. I hope you read the first part. I will demonstrate the flaws, inaccuracies and illogicality of the rest of the State Dept Report in this part of my analysis. [I stopped at number 12 in the previous part, I will resume from that]

13/ The State Dept. report claimed “*Opposition political party leaders reported suspicions of telephone tapping and other electronic eavesdropping*”.

It is unfortunate that the authors of the report do not have friends residing in Ethiopia. If they had, they would have noticed this is a common joke on the street rather than a serious claim worth stating at this kind of official document.

As everyone knows, Ethiopia is undergoing an ambition breath-taking expansion of telecom services and infrastructures. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), internet subscription grew by thousands percents each year from year 2000 to 2009.

In the previous five-years, the government set ambitious targets; like, enabling every Ethiopian access telecommunication services within 5 km of her residence, increasing Tele-density for fixed line by fivefold and Tele-density for mobile by fifteen-fold, expanding the number of Internet users by more than eleven fold as well as providing 15,000 (almost all then existing) Kebeles with at least five telephones lines.

Most of the target's were met, while over-performance was reported in some areas. As a result, as of last June, the number of mobile phone subscribers stood at 17 million (from about 5 mil. in 2011) and the number of internet service users reached 2.5 million (from 100,000 in 2011), according to the data from the relevant Ministry.

This clearly demonstrates the government's commitment to expand the access and use of telecom services. This is not a government that loose sleep planning on how to hinder people from communication among each-other.

However, for a poor country like Ethiopia, this kind of huge expansion cannot succeed without hitches and glitches here and there. The biggest challenge came from overload of servers and network transmitters, besides vandalism on fiber optic lines.

As a result, telephone users encountered their calls going to the wrong receiver, phone calls being cross-over by other noises and the like. The opposition politicians tried to portray this as a conspiracy, but since this happened to random ordinary citizens no one took them seriously. In fact, citizens joked mimicking them by claiming that they are being spied as well.

No sensible person would assume the government has the resource to monitor 17 million mobile phones. Many people use mobile numbers registered under another person's name and it is presumable that, like many businessmen & public figures, the opposition politicians keep more than one mobile number.

14/ The report claims that in addition to the national television and radio, “three private FM radio stations broadcast in the capital city, and at least 13 community radio stations broadcast in the regions”.

It is questionable that the report chose the diversity of the current media landscape in such misleading description.

The reality of Ethiopia's media landscape is much different. The growth in radio services is dazzling. Today, there are 3 MW radio services and 31 (thirty-one) FM radio services, almost half of which are privately owned. This is in addition to the 16 community radios.

No less importantly, about half of the radio services serve the so far neglected areas and marginalized communities. The total number of the languages of transmissions has reached about 50 !

The surge in the number of languages of transmission is expected to be replicated in Television transmission in the next three years when the plan to launch about 10 more TV channels and 5 regional TV stations is completed (that is in addition to the existing 5 regional televisions). Moreover, several many public-owned, private and community radio services currently are in the process of licensing and launching.

15/The report also complains that “government-controlled media closely reflected the views of the government and the ruling EPRDF”.

This may be true. But we should ask “what are the views of the government and the ruling EPRDF” reflected by the public media?.

As anyone can check it for himself, Ethiopia's public televisions and radio stations rarely talk about ideological issues or EPRDF political programs. More than 90% of the non-entertainment programs cover development works: Infrastructure projects, expansion of basic social services, agricultural extension services, best practices and the like.

EPRDF, as a developmental party, likes and supports these issues and works. On the other-hand, the opposition parties, due to their short-sighted zero-sum politics, downplay such issues – sometimes explicitly oppose them.

Is the State Dept Report asking that the public media decrease developmental programs and replace them with celebrity gossip, like the Western media?

16/ The State Dept Report makes further overblown claims regarding press freedom. It claimed: “The government continued to arrest, harass, and prosecute journalists.”

As an evidence the State Dept Report stated: “Ethio-Channel, Negadras, Feteh, and two Muslim newspapers closed due to government pressure.”

What does government pressure mean? For example: Ethio-Channel was closed has been closed (not it resumed work) because it failed to re-knew its trade registration and failed to pay some taxes.

Are journalists and media houses above the law? Is the government supposed to keep silent praying that the media would be kind to observe trade and tax laws?

17/The State Dept. becomes confusing at some of its pages. For example: It claims: “the Ministry of Justice filed three charges against Feteh editor in chief Temesgen Dessalegn. These charges included inciting and agitating the country’s youth to engage in violence, defamation of government, and destabilizing the public by spreading false reports”.

So what? Is this wrong by itself? The State Dept Report didn't explain if the charges are wrong. It believes that filling charges against a journalist is wrong. Mind you, the journalist is not under arrest.

18/ The State Dept. Report disgraces itself when brings the two Swedish case under its list of violation of press freedom. In an attempt to show the “problems” of Ethiopia's anti-terrorism law, the report said: “In December 2011 a court convicted them of rendering support to a terrorist organization and illegally entering the country.”

A perfect rebuttal of this nonsensical claim is lucidly made by the bulletin from the foreign ministry as follows:

*“The Federal High Court of Ethiopia has found two Swedish journalists, Johan Persson and Martin Schibbye, guilty of supporting terrorism and sentenced each to eleven years in jail after the pair entered the country under the auspices of a known terrorist organization, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). The pair admitted entering the country illegally but pleaded not guilty to supporting terrorism, claiming to have entered Ethiopia to gather news information about a Swedish oil company working in the Somali region of Ethiopia. The court found this defence “unacceptable,” as the ONLF had organized the journey of the accused starting from London and travelling via Kenya and Somalia into eastern Ethiopia. This is a route well-known to be used by the ONLF in organizing terrorist activities inside Ethiopia. The two journalists were captured by Ethiopian troops after a clash with the group of rebels escorting them. The court found that this also demonstrated the level of cooperation between the ONLF and the two journalists. It was on this basis that the two were accused and found guilty of supporting the ONLF and crossing the border illegally.*

The two made no effort to contact the pertinent bodies for accreditation in the Somali region; instead, they started by opting for illegal means to enter the country. There have been claims that the decision to try the two was a deliberate attempt to deter journalists from trying to report on the alleged abuse of human rights in the Somali Regional State to which Human Rights Watch has made frequent, if unsubstantiated, reference. The two journalists, however, did not enter the region to investigate such allegations. On their own admission they were trying to gather information on the activities of a Swedish oil company. Equally, as any journalist knows, a terrorist organization like the ONLF believes it will benefit from the publicity provided by western journalists travelling under its auspices.

In fact, not for the first time, the double standards of certain advocacy, human rights and media organizations are apparent in their comments. The media in the countries where these groups operate function under very specific rules and regulations that govern media and journalistic activities. Whoever violates those rules is held accountable, at least eventually, as the recent detail of widespread phone-hacking in the UK makes clear. At least one newspaper there has been closed down and even the journalists have been cautious to raise claims of press freedom in the face of widespread and obvious illegalities and other excesses. The claim that accountability is proper and natural in America or Europe but wrong, even unlawful, in the developing world is a classic case of the double standards for which these advocacy and human rights organizations have become notorious. They frequently and indeed almost consistently claim that journalists (particularly western journalists) should be immune to any consequences for illegal activities and violations as long as they are committed in Africa. This is unacceptable. The

media cannot be above the law in Europe or in Africa, or indeed wherever it operates. Nor can freedom of the press be allowed to be synonymous with freedom to do anything one wants or violation of legal norms whether these involve illegal entry or posing a threat to a country's national security by involvement with a terrorist organization."

19/ The State Dept. Report becomes outright hypocritical when it complains: "The government restricted access to the Internet and blocked several Web sites,....of Ginbot 7, the OLF, and the ONLF."

Upon reading that, you might think the United States imposes no restrictions on the internet and wants Ethiopia to follow that.

In the first place, it is neither logical nor practical for Ethiopia to copy everything from United States.

Secondly, and more importantly, the United States implements a complex set of mechanism to filter the internet. Unlike Ethiopia, which blocks only terror-group affiliated websites, the United State restricts not only for anti-state websites but also entertainment websites to protect big corporations' interests. The reality in the United States is summarized by one website as follows:

*"The Internet in the United States is highly regulated, supported by a complex set of legally binding and privately mediated mechanisms.[1]. The USA practices forceful seizures of domains, people and computers that it does not agree with many times without notification, causing the websites to be unable to continue operating, some high profile cases are Napster, Wikileaks, PirateBay, Defense Distributor (3D printed gun), MegaUpload.*

*After a decade and half of ongoing contentious debate over content regulation, the country is still very far from reaching political consensus on the acceptable limits of free speech and the best means of protecting minors and policing illegal activity on the Internet. Gambling, cyber security, and dangers to children who frequent social networking sites are important ongoing debates. Significant public resistance to proposed content restriction policies have prevented the more extreme measures used in some other countries from taking hold in the U.S.*

*Public dialogue, legislative debate, and judicial review have produced filtering strategies in the United States that are different from those found in most of the rest of the world. Many government-mandated attempts to regulate content have been barred on First Amendment grounds, often after lengthy legal battles. However, the government has been able to exert pressure indirectly where it cannot directly censor. With the exception of child pornography, content restrictions tend to rely more on the removal of content than blocking; most often these controls rely upon the involvement of private parties, backed by state encouragement or the threat of legal action."*

20/ According to sources, the ruling party, via the Ministry of Education, continued to give preference to students loyal to the party in assignments to postgraduate programs.

21/ According to multiple credible sources, teachers and high school students in grade 10 and above were required to attend training on the concepts of revolutionary democracy and EPRDF party ideology.

22/ For some unclear reason, the State Dept Report raises the villagization program. It describes it saying: *“The national government and regional governments continued to put in place “villagization” plans...These plans involved the relocation of scattered rural populations from arid or semiarid lands vulnerable to recurring droughts into designated clusters by regional governments. The stated purposes of villagization are to improve the provision of government services (i.e., health care, education, and clean water), protect vulnerable communities from natural disasters and attacks, and change environmentally destructive patterns of shifting cultivation. Some observers stated the purpose was to enable the large-scale leasing of land for commercial agriculture, a claim the government denied. The government described the villagization program as strictly voluntary.”*

The State Dept Report also affirms that: *“Assessments by international donors continued to find no systematic evidence of human rights violations in this program”*.

However, for some unclear reason, it cites the ideologically motivated and unfounded statements Human Rights Watch, which claims: *“the process as “far from voluntary.” The report described a process in which security forces and local militia attended meetings with those communities [who are to be resettled as part of the villegization program]”*.

As I noted earlier, the local militia is a voluntary force recruited from rural communities. If it were a salaried permanent force – like the police – is it wrong that it attends meetings at a place where it lives? After all the militia do not live in military camps, they make a living by farming lands and/or rearing livestock with the community. The civilization concerns them as well. At any rate, the Human Rights Watch statements has no base as the government clearly stated at the time in the following words:

*“There have been repeated investigations including at least two substantial surveys by donors, in 2011 and last year, as well as other checks on the progress of what has been identified by almost all those involved as a voluntary process. As we reported in a Week in the Horn recently, in June last year, for example, DFID, USAID, the UN and Irish Aid, carried out a detailed investigation into the villagization process in Gambella Regional State where the project is expected to involve up to 45,000 households. As of mid 2012, some 30,000 households had moved and the report concluded that the first year’s operation seemed to have over-achieved targets though the second*

*year had under-achieved. The mission's report noted clear improvements in conditions in the new villages since the previous visit, with water pumps installed and were working, homes made safe from flooding, schools provided and road access improved, though it also felt more could still be done over health facilities at the new sites. They found no concern over food supplies, in part because some people had continued to cultivate their original land and been able to move back and forth between new and old sites. The mission's report specifically noted, as did the earlier mission, that it found no evidence of forced relocation or systematic human rights abuses. Certainly, a number of people interviewed said they didn't want to move and there were some claims of unmet promises, but the mission found that communities that objected to moving had stayed. It might also be added that both missions concluded that there was no indication of any previously settled land being used for commercial farming. All villages, with one exception, reported having continued access to their original land."*

23/The State Dept Report proves that its authors are completely out touch with reality in some of its pages.

For example, it says: "During the year, there were credible reports teachers and other government workers had their employment terminated if they belonged to opposition political parties.."

Oh, really? Is that so? Ok. But, where does Dr. Merera Gudina work? It is at the government owned Addis Ababa University. In fact, he often assume the Department head position that rotates every two years. The same is true with Dr. Beyene Petros, Dr. Dagnachew Asefa. Even Dr. Berhanu Nega had a secured job at AAU until he himself left it to work in an NGO. In fact, it seems like EPRDF wants these opposition politicians to recruit University staff and students using that position. Because their students invariably testimony that these opposition politicians spend more time criticizing the government and the ruling party than teaching their lesson plan.

24/ At some of the pages of the State Dept. Report, you start to wonder whether the report was written or copy-pasted from opposition parties' statements. For example it says: "Because of an ongoing dispute with the EPRDF, Medrek, the largest opposition front, remained outside the Joint Council [of Political Parties".

What is "ongoing dispute"? Are EPRDF and Medrek quarelling about a woman or some other personal issue? No! Then, why does the report want to present the matter in this manner?

The problem with Medrek is that it doesn't want to sign the code of conducts of political parties – which drafted by the international consultant IDA, then developed with the participation of some 60 political parties.

Medrek has no real reason not to sign the code of conduct. It is simply afraid that signing the Code will be considered as making peace with EPRDF. That

means its extremist diaspora supporters might stop sending money and the attention from international NGOs and from diplomats in Addis Ababa might decrease.

25/ The State Dept Report turns from funny to sad at the last pages. It claims: *“Although the law provides for freedom of association and the right to engage in unrestricted peaceful political activity, the government limited this right in practice.”*

Ok. What is the basis to say that? The State Dept. Report says three things:-

One of the “problems” with the CSO law, according to the State Dept. Report is that: *“anonymous donations to NGOs are not permitted. All potential donors were therefore aware their names would be public knowledge.”*

Oh, is that a problem? I have just one question. Why the Justice Department of the United States requires full disclosure from NGOs and provide it to the public as part of the Freedom of Information database?

Again, the State Dept Report says, as part of its freedom of assembly concern that: *“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs screens registration applications from international NGOs and submits a recommendation on whether to approve or deny registration.”*

What was Ethiopia supposed to do then? Let every member of the international aid industry profit from Ethiopia without any control and oversight?

Don't get surprised. The State Dept Reports gets even worse. It complains at length that Ethiopia's CSO law restricts NGOs from wasting more than 30% of their budget on administrative costs.

Mind you, most of the aid that comes to Ethiopia through these NGOs is taken from western citizens either through tax or gift. Those generous friends of Ethiopia certainly wish that their money reaches the poor and bring real changes on the ground.

To the contrary, the State Dept. Report appears to ask that Ethiopia should let bureaucrats in the aid industry spend the money through car purchases, retreats, conferences, etc.

What more evidence do we need to say that the State Dept. Report is hijacked by the International NGO whose primary agenda is to sustain their money flow?

**LIKE IT OR NOT**, you can not hide the truth beyond some point. As I noted from the beginning, Ethiopia is not perfect in human rights. But her failings and improvements should be told. After-all, human rights is not a push-button case, it is a matter of process and institution building. The State Dept. Report admits that somewhere down the report in the following terms:

*“The government-established EHRC, which is funded by the parliament and subject to parliamentary review, is a semiautonomous body that investigates human rights complaints and produces annual and thematic reports. The commission operated 112 legal aid centers in collaboration with 17 universities and two civil society organizations, the EWLA and the Ethiopian Christian Lawyers Fellowship. The commission also completed the preparatory measures to sign collaborative agreements with two additional universities. The EHRC reported its Addis Ababa headquarters resolved 90 percent of the 952 complaints submitted to it during the year.*

*The Office of the Ombudsman has authority to receive and investigate complaints with respect to administrative mismanagement by executive branch offices. The office received 2,094 complaints in Addis Ababa from September 2011 to September 2012. Of these, the ombudsman opened investigations into 784, and the office reported it resolved the remaining cases through alternative means. The majority of complaints dealt with social security, labor, housing, and property disputes. The Office of the Ombudsman did not compile nationwide statistics. The Ombudsman’s Office opened five new offices around the country during the year.*

*In May the government completed drafting of a National Human Rights Action Plan, with an implementation coordinating office to be housed at the Ministry of Justice.”*