PRESS RELEASE

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ETHIOPIAN AMERICAN AND ETHIOPIAN LAWYERS IN THE UNITED STATES CONDEMN THE REGIME OF MELES ZENAWI FOR PERSECUTING ETHIOPIAN LAWYERS AND FOR ITS CONTINUING PRACTICES OF GROSS HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Ethiopian American and Ethiopian lawyers in the United States strongly condemn the regime of Meles Zenawi for its recent unlawful arrest and detention of Ethiopian civil/human rights lawyer Yalemzewd Bekele and others engaged in peaceful exercise of their constitutional rights, and for its continuing practices of gross human rights violations.

In condemning and protesting the arrest of Yalemzewd Bekele and others, and the rampant violation of human rights by the regime of Meles Zenawi, we note the following facts, among others, documented by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and United States Department of State, and the Inquiry Commission on the Massacre of Unarmed Peaceful Protesters:

- In November 2005, 193 peaceful and unarmed protesters were unlawfully killed, execution-style, by security personnel loyal to the regime of Meles Zenawi. According to the Inquiry Commission, "The majority of [the peaceful protesters] died from shots to the head." 763 persons sustained serious non-fatal injuries. The regime has used and continues to use paramilitary groups to commit extrajudicial political killings;

- Since the parliamentary elections of 2005, the regime of Meles Zenawi has embarked on a massive and sustained crackdown of all dissent in the country, resulting in the arrest and detention of over 60,000 persons. There have been massive extrajudicial killings and massacres in Oromia, Gambella, Sidama and Somali regions, as well as many other parts of the country;

- The regime of Meles Zenawi has unlawfully imprisoned the winners of the 2005 parliamentary elections and leaders of the opposition, journalists, leaders of civil society and human rights defenders. These political prisoners are held in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. They receive little or no medical care;

- The show trial of the opposition leaders and others held in Qaliti prison has been condemned universally by governments and international human rights organizations as a sham and a fraud, and without any credibility;

- In H.R. 5680, the Ethiopia Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2006, the United States Congress has demanded the immediate and unconditional release of opposition leaders and all political prisoners in Ethiopia. Numerous members of Congress have publicly condemned the gross violations of human rights by the regime of Meles Zenawi;

- The regime of Meles Zenawi has routinely engaged and continues to engage in torture, beatings, systematic abuse, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or

punishment of dissidents and opponents in violation of Arts. 14, 16 and 18 of the Ethiopian Constitution;

- The regime of Meles Zenawi has engaged and continues to engage in disappearances and politically motivated abductions of dissidents and opponents. Such persons are held incommunicado in undisclosed locations for varying lengths of time ranging from weeks to months, in violation of Arts. 10, 13, 14, 16, 17 of the Ethiopian Constitution;

- The regime of Meles Zenawi continues to harass, persecute and prosecute publishers, editors and journalists for publishing allegedly fabricated information and for other trumped up violations of the press law in violation of Art. 29 of the Ethiopian Constitution. The regime controls all broadcast media;

- The regime of Meles Zenawi has engaged in widespread violation of the privacy rights of Ethiopians by searching and seizing property from persons, homes and offices without properly authorized judicial search warrants, and/or by arresting persons without probable cause or properly authorized judicial arrest warrants in violation of Art. 26 of the Ethiopian Constitution. There is ample evidence showing that police have used fraudulent warrants or no warrants at all to enter homes and commit criminal acts, including extortion and home invasion robberies;

- Following the May, 2005 elections, security forces loyal to Meles Zenawi illegally entered private homes and arrested thousands of persons in the middle of the night, and in such unlawful search and seizures, often detained family members or other residents on the premises in violation of Arts. 17 and 26 of the Ethiopian Constitution;

- The regime of Meles Zenawi has severely curtailed the right of freedom of association and the right of the people to engage in unrestricted peaceful political activity, by imposing stiff registration and licensing requirements and summarily denying permits to human rights groups, dissident and opposition organizations in violation of Art. 31 of the Ethiopian Constitution;

- The regime of Meles Zenawi continues to violate the people's right to assemble freely by disrupting or unlawfully banning opposition party meetings, arbitrarily denying or delaying or engaging in last minute revocation of public meeting or demonstration permits, and by using pressure tactics on ordinary Ethiopians, including requiring opposition members to renounce their party membership if they wanted access to fertilizer, other agricultural services, employment opportunities, health care, or other benefits controlled by the government in violation of Art. 30 of the Ethiopian Constitution;

- The regime of Meles Zenawi thrives in a culture of corruption and oppression. Regime officials continue to manipulate the privatization process, as state- and party-owned businesses received preferential access to land leases and credit. There is rampant corruption, nepotism and cronyism and lack of transparency in telecommunications, power, and other infrastructure services in violation of Art. 12 of the Ethiopian constitution;

- The regime of Meles Zenawi relies on politically appointed judges to obtain predetermined outcomes, which often result in a miscarriage of justice in violation of Art. 78 of the Ethiopian Constitution. Judges such as Birtukan Mideksa have been dismissed in recent years for performing their judicial duties with neutrality and impartially. Others have been promoted for delivering judgments favorable to the government.

- The Chairman, Vice Chairman and other members of the Inquiry Commission on the Massacre of Unarmed Peaceful Protesters have been forced to leave the country because they refused to alter the facts and conclusions of their investigations. They were forced into exile to avoid persecution by the regime of Meles Zenawi. We reject all current and future attempts by the regime of Meles Zenawi calculated to impugn the integrity and professionalism of the Chair, Vice Chair and other members who have left the Commission, or campaigns intended to assassinate their characters or motives;

Aware of the continuing and systematic violations of the fundamentals rights of the Ethiopian people, and joining Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the European Union and the United States congress, **we call upon the regime of Meles Zenawi** to:

- Release immediately and unconditionally civil/human rights lawyer Yalemzewd Bekele and the other individual arrested and detained with her, leaders of the opposition, journalists and civil society leaders currently held in unlawful detention in Qaliti prison, and dismiss all criminal charges against them;

- Prosecute the individuals, officials and others who were responsible for the deaths of 193 unarmed and peaceful protesters and scores of others who sustained serious injuries as a result of the unlawful use of deadly force by regime security personnel in November, 2005;

- Establish independent and impartial investigations into any allegations of torture, official abuse, arbitrary killings, arrests and detentions, and bring to justice those responsible for such heinous acts;

- Implement specific measures to ensure the independence of the judiciary, and institute due process to guarantee defendants accused of crimes the right to be tried by a competent and independent court, as well as enjoyment of the rights to the presumption of innocence, confrontation and compulsory process, speedy trial and assistance of counsel;

- Implement structures and processes that maximize and ensure the exercise of the rights to freedom of expression and association for individuals, journalists, political parties and civil society groups, including freedom of the media, as guaranteed in Arts. 13 and 29 of the Ethiopian Constitution and international and regional human rights treaties to which Ethiopia is party, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights;

- Ensure that all political prisoners and other defendants are treated humanely while in custody in accordance with international and regional standards for the treatment of prisoners, such as the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, with particular regard to medical treatment, family visits and reading and writing materials;

- Respect and protect the legitimate role of human rights defenders and civil society activists, in conformity with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

We call upon Ethiopians in the Diaspora to:

- Undertake all efforts in their countries of residence to contact political, religious, humanitarian and civic leaders and seek their assistance in mobilizing national legislative and executive policy makers to apply pressure on the regime of Meles Zenawi;

- Organize and undertake legislative efforts along the lines of H.R. 5680 to ensure that the regime of Meles Zenawi will not receive **non-humanitarian** aid from donor countries unless he demonstrates material and measurable progress in advancing freedom, democracy and human rights in Ethiopia;

- Begin or strengthen collaborative working relationships with human rights, civil liberties and other humanitarian and political organizations to gain the immediate release of the unjustly imprisoned opposition leaders, journalists, leaders of civil society and human rights defenders; and

- Organize local charity and benevolence associations with the utmost urgency to raise funds and provide all necessary financial, material and moral assistance to the families of the prisoners of conscience in Ethiopia, and exiled former officials and civil servants who left their service in the regime of Meles Zenawi on the grounds of conscience.

We call upon the Government of the United States to:

- Continue to press the regime of Meles Zenawi Ethiopia to observe and conform its conduct to international standards on freedom of expression and association, and to release immediately and unconditionally all the prisoners of conscience on trial and in detention, including leaders of the opposition, journalists, civil society leaders and human rights defenders; and

- Enact H.R. 5680, the Ethiopia Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2006 in the 109th Congress, Second Session.

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