

UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



May 18, 2012

EDWARD R. ROYCE
Fortieth District-California

His Excellency Meles Zenawi
Prime Minister
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

Dear Prime Minister Zenawi:

As the former chair of the Subcommittee on Africa and a strong supporter of U.S.-Ethiopian relations, I am writing to express my deep concern with the Republic of Ethiopia's disregard for press freedom. This includes the case of 24 detained journalists whose sentencing has been rescheduled for June 21, 2012.

A pillar of a stable and functioning democracy, a free press empowers individuals with the knowledge needed to be active participants in civil society. Only with the free flow of information can one be expected to formulate well-grounded opinions and make informed decisions, a vital aspect of a representative democracy.

As the current chair of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, I understand the need to employ vigorous counterterrorism measures to protect the nation. However, unnecessarily compromising press freedoms under the guise of an anti-terrorism law which criminalizes "whosoever writes, edits, prints, publishes, publicizes, disseminates, shows" reporting deemed critical of the government opens the door to motivated censorship. National security must not cripple press freedom.

In of itself, the arrest of the 24 journalists was grounds for alarm. But the subsequent judicial process clearly fails to meet international standards. These include calculated occurrences of defendants being tasked with legal procedures without their lawyers present and the use of state-run television as a public relations platform to pressure the court's decision. Sadly, among those detained is Eskinder Nega, a recipient of the prestigious PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award.

Ethiopia has made impressive strides in terms of economic growth and poverty reduction. Yet, the continual violation of press freedoms and an apparently politicized judicial system overshadows and undermines many of your country's positive developments. In the spirit of cooperation and concern for these journalists, and all Ethiopians, I appreciate your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ed Royce".

EDWARD R. ROYCE