



May 18, 2012

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Via facsimile: +1-202-456-2461

Dear President Obama,

We write to express our concern about your invitation to Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to attend a meeting on food security during the G-8 summit at Camp David on May 19. We urge you to use your time together to address the current plight of Ethiopian civil society, media, and political opposition. Otherwise, your invitation risks sending the wrong message at a time when Ethiopia's human rights situation is becoming increasingly grim.

After more than two decades of Meles Zenawi's leadership, Ethiopia's institutions have become mere extensions of ruling party power. The country has steadily grown more authoritarian since the 2005 elections ended in bloodshed and controversy. The ruling party won more than 99 per cent of the seats in both the 2008 local government elections and the 2010 general parliamentary elections, mainly due to the government's comprehensive crackdown on dissent.

In recent years the Ethiopian government has severely curtailed basic freedoms, particularly freedom of expression and association. We cannot be certain how many people Ethiopia has wrongfully detained for peacefully expressing their political views because the government will not allow credible, independent organizations access to all detention facilities. Credible estimates place the number of people arbitrarily detained in the thousands, particularly in regions like Oromia and Somali Region, where the government faces long-running insurgencies. Torture, ill treatment, and appalling conditions of detention are widespread in Ethiopia's prisons.

The government has increasingly used flawed legislation to persecute independent voices. Prime Minister Zenawi's government has used the 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation to undermine the work of independent civil society organizations, especially those working on human rights. Several of the oldest and most respected

Ethiopian human rights groups have been forced to cease most of their operations due to the restrictions on foreign funding imposed by the law or arbitrary enforcement by the new agency established to regulate nongovernmental activity.

The government has also used a 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation to target members of the media and political opposition, arresting more than 100 people in 2011. To date, five journalists and two opposition members have been convicted under the law. Six journalists, at least two opposition members, and 16 others are currently on trial facing politically motivated terrorism charges. Two of those convicted in 2011 were Swedish journalists who were attempting to report on the conflict in the Ogaden region, where Ethiopian security forces have allegedly committed crimes against humanity during counter-insurgency operations. They were both sentenced to 11 years in prison. Dozens of other opposition members and supporters remain in detention awaiting trial on terrorism-related charges.

Finally, the government has issued a new legal directive compelling the government printing office (the only printing press still operational in the country) to censor the content of all publications under threat of criminal sanction.

The United States, the World Bank, and other states and institutions have shown little or no attention to Ethiopia's worsening human rights record. By inviting Prime Minister Meles to the G-8 summit, the U.S. government is sending a message that at best shows a lack of concern about the human rights situation in Ethiopia, and at worst, will be perceived as a U.S. endorsement of the Ethiopian government's policies.

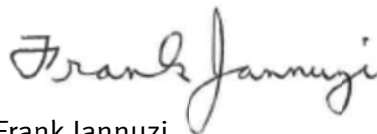
We urge your administration to review its policy towards Ethiopia and consider how U.S. government programs—including those pertaining to development and military assistance—can be re-tooled to advance the cause of human rights in Ethiopia.

The U.S. should privately and publicly call upon the Ethiopian government to take credible and immediate steps to reverse Ethiopia's policy of human rights repression. Ethiopia should amend the Charities and Societies and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamations to bring them into compliance with international best practices, release all persons arbitrarily detained, including opposition members and journalists, and ensure access throughout the country for humanitarian and human rights organizations and the media.

Yours,



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Executive Director
Human Rights Watch



Frank Jannuzi
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