

THE SECOND 2023 PERIODIC ASSESSMENTS ON
THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS
IN ETHIOPIA

August 2023

Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center
ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

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First Printed in 2023 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

The Publisher:

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About the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC)

The Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC) was founded in December 2019, after HRDs and human rights organizations met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia at the Claiming Space Forum held from December 9 to 13, 2019 organized by Defend Defenders (the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project), in collaboration with the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia, the Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations (CEHRO), and the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), to establish a national human rights defenders network, which was named the “Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center” (EHRDC). EHRDC is legally registered as of November 2020 with registration number 5220. The Center aims to build a strong network of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) by building their capacity, creating a safe working environment, protecting, defending, and advocating for HRDs in Ethiopia.

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1. Contextual Assessment

Despite the end of the war in northern Ethiopia, armed clashes and human rights violations continue to persist in other areas of the country, particularly in the Amhara, Oromia, Benishangul Gumuz, and Gambella regions and in the capital, Addis Ababa. According to a report by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), “conflict, insecurity, attacks by armed groups, and security measures by government forces have continued to cause civilian deaths, bodily injuries, and displacements in all regions of Ethiopia, despite positive improvements following the Pretoria peace agreement that brought relative peace in the northern part of the country”.¹ Extrajudicial killing, abduction, and kidnapping of citizens for ransom have become a human rights challenge in most parts of the country, particularly in Oromia and Amhara regions, posing a challenge to the respect of the rule of law and human rights.

In the Oromia region of Ethiopia, eviction has been a contentious issue, with many people facing forceful evictions due to house demolitions by authorities in the newly formed Sheger City surrounding the capital, Addis Ababa. The regional authorities have been accused of carrying out evictions illegally, without consultation with residents or providing alternative housing, as well as using violence and intimidation to evict people from their homes.² In this regard, the mayor of the city, Teshome Adugna, stated in an interview with the media that the administration is taking legal action against illegally constructed houses.³ He remarked that the people were previously living illegally in poverty, stating that the people were previously living illegally in poverty, but now they are legally poor. His statements have sparked controversy and received public condemnation. Similarly, the demolition of residential and commercial buildings has been carried out in the capital, affecting many livelihoods. In relation to this, dozens of persons with disabilities

¹ የኢትዮጵያ ሰብአዊ መብቶች ኮሚሽን, ‘የኢትዮጵያ ሰብአዊ መብቶች ሁኔታ አመታዊ ሪፖርት ከሰኔ 2014 ዓ.ም እስከ ሰኔ 2015 ዓ.ም’ (July 12, 2023) v-xvi

² EHRC press release, “በኦሮሚያ ክልል በሽገር ከተማ እየተካሄደ ያለው ቤቶችን የማፍረስ እና በግዳጅ ማስነሳት እርምጃ የመኖሪያ ቤት አልባነትን አባብሏል” (March 31, 2023)

³ Addis Standard, ‘News Analysis: Despite growing grievances Sheger city officials continue demolishing “illegal houses”, deny accusations of ethnic prejudice’ (Addis Standard, March 6, 2023) <<https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-despite-growing-grievances-sheger-city-officials-continue-demolishing-illegal-houses-deny-accusations-of-ethnic-prejudice/>> accessed August 11, 2023

have gathered at the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission gate and submitted complaints opposing the government's actions of evictions, ill treatment and taking of their properties.⁴

On the other hand, armed clashes with government forces in the Amhara region have resulted in serious human rights violations and beyond. After the federal government announced the dissolution of the special regional forces and paramilitary force known as Fano,” On April 6, 2023, the decision was met with widespread protests, violence, resulting in civilian killings in the Amhara region. In response, the federal joint task force detained those who mobilized the public, opposed, and criticized the decision, including journalists, social media activists, civilians, campaigners, members of civil society groups, and opposition groups in the Amhara region and in the capital Addis Ababa. The detained dissidents are allegedly accused of terrorism charges and attempting to overthrow the government under the anti-terrorism law.

In addition, on July 18, 2023, ethnic conflict erupted in the Gambella region, resulting in death, destruction, and displacement. According to reports, the conflict caused severe human rights violations, allegedly resulting in the deaths of 24 people.⁵ The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has called for more attention from the Federal government to the region. Previously, from June 14 – 16, 2022, the region was affected by a serious armed clash that resulted in the deaths of dozens of people and impacted the work of human rights defenders, exposing them to risks and threats from authorities.

The EHRDC, mandated to ensure the protection of human rights defenders, is following their cases. By following their cases, the EHRDC can document and stay informed about the challenges and risks faced by human rights defenders in Ethiopia and take actions to provide them with the necessary support and protection. This is an important role for EHRDC, as protecting human rights defenders is crucial for the promotion and protection of human rights in Ethiopia. Thus, this assessment aims to assess the concerns of HRDs from May 15 to August 15, 2023. Nevertheless,

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Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), ‘በአዲስ አበባ ከተማ የንግድ ቤቶችን ከማፍረስ ሂደት ጋር በተያያዘ አካል ጉዳተኞች ለኢሰመኮ ያቀረቡትን አቤቱታ በተመለከተ’ (May 23, 2023)

⁵ Abreham Tekle, ‘A land torn apart: Gambella’s struggle against ethnic violence and neglect’ (The Reporter, July 29, 2023) <<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/35697/>> accessed from the internet on July 20, 2023

some issues that were not addressed in the first 2023 assessment are also covered in this paper as they may have causal relationships. To accomplish its objectives, the assessment employs a qualitative research method through the analysis of secondary data and open sources. To verify our sources, we triangulate data through interviews and authoritative document references.

1.1. Analysis of Amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and Continued Challenges in Protecting Civil Liberties and Fundamental Rights

In 2020, the Ethiopian Government introduced amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, bringing about significant changes to the legislation. These revisions aim to address some of the concerns raised regarding the previous version of the law. Notably, certain activities that were previously categorized as "acts of terrorism" were now excluded from the law's scope. For instance, provisions allowing terrorism charges against workers impeding public services were removed, reflecting a shift in the law's focus.

The amended Anti-Terrorism Proclamation also introduced specific measures to protect individuals' rights to a fair trial. Suspects gained the right to access regional courts, and searches of property without a warrant were deemed illegal. Furthermore, the law stipulated that suspects must be presented before a court within 48 hours of arrest, and a witness protection program was established. These amendments were intended to strengthen the protection of civil liberties and fundamental rights within the legal framework.

However, despite these welcomed revisions, concerns have been raised by international organizations such as Amnesty International.⁶ They claim that the revised law still possesses the potential for misuse against government critics. It is argued that while the new law demonstrates the government's intention to distance itself from the practices of the previous regime, it also aims to maintain a certain level of control over public discourse and space. Consequently, it is not surprising that concerns persist regarding the protection of civil liberties and fundamental rights despite these amendments. It is evident that further changes are necessary to address the remaining gaps and ensure the effective safeguarding of these essential freedoms.

⁶ 'Release of 'coup' suspects without charge follows continued abuse of anti-terrorism law' <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/10/ethiopia-release-of-coup-suspects-without-charge-follows-continued-abuse-of-anti-terrorism-law/>> accessed August 14, 2023.

1.2. Government Abuse of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation: Silencing Human Rights Defenders

While it is essential for Ethiopia to protect its citizens from the grave consequences associated with terrorism, international human rights mechanisms have repeatedly observed that states should not fulfil this duty by enacting measures that contravene their obligations under international human rights law. Anti-terrorism laws should not be used to undermine fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, association, or assembly.⁷

As previously discussed, Ethiopia's anti-terrorism law has consistently been criticized for its breadth and lack of precision. This lack of precision goes against the principle of legality, also known as the *nullum crimen* principle, which is recognized as a fundamental rule of international criminal, humanitarian, and human rights law.⁸ The *nullum crimen* principle stipulates that criminal offenses must be defined in a way that is sufficiently foreseeable, accessible, and precise. The fundamental problem with Ethiopia's anti-terrorism law is that, due to its staggering breadth and vagueness, an ordinary citizen cannot conform his or her conduct to the law because it is impossible to know or even predict what conduct may violate the law and subject that citizen to severe criminal sanctions.

An example of a problematic provision is Article 3(e), which makes "obstructing public service" a terrorism offense. The definition of "public service" within the proclamation is exceedingly broad, encompassing various sectors such as infrastructure, electronics, information, communication, and information telecommunications. Therefore, to prevent forms of protest or action involving engagement with public services from being inappropriately labeled as terrorism, it is crucial to narrow down the definition of "public service" to one that is specific and consistent with the severity of terrorist offenses. This would help ensure that legitimate acts of protest or action related to public services are not wrongly captured under the terrorism provisions.

⁷ UNOHCHR, 'Human Rights, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism' <<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/Factsheet32EN.pdf>> accessed August 11, 2023

⁸ Kokkinakis v Greece (1993) 17 EHRR 397, §44-46 SW and CR v UK (1995) 21 EHRR 363, § 44-46; Kafkaris v Cyprus, at par. 140

In addition to this, there are other articles in the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation that suffer from obscurity of meaning. For instance, Article 5 establishes "intimidation to commit a terrorist act" as an offense but fails to provide a clear definition of what constitutes intimidation, potentially leading to excessive interpretation and abuse. The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2462 (2019) have encouraged the amendment of this offense to ensure it adheres to the principles of necessity, proportionality, and legal certainty.⁹ Similarly, Article 7, which deals with "conspiracy to carry out terrorist acts," faces the same problem and should be amended to define the meaning of conspiracy.

Furthermore, Article 9, which makes the rendering of support a terrorist act, requires amendment. The wording of this article is excessively broad and may result in the criminalization of activities that cannot reasonably or fairly be described as terrorist in nature or intent. Of particular concern are sub-articles 1(a) and (b), which categorize the preparation of documents or information and the provision of technical, counseling, or professional support as terrorist acts, even if done indirectly. The broad language, which criminalizes even indirect acts, could potentially capture a range of legitimate activities carried out by civil society, lawyers, journalists, and human rights defenders as acts of terrorism. The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism addressed this issue substantively in their report to the Human Rights Council A/HRC/40/52 in 2019 and urged states to avoid overly broad provisions for terrorism in national legislation, given the adverse effects on the functioning and capacity of civil society and civic space. Additionally, sub-article (4) of Article 9 should also be amended as it imposes a disproportionate penalty for the negligent use of material without clarifying the threshold of negligence that constitutes legal liability under relevant domestic law.

⁹ Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; the Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy; the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.<<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=24664>>

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2462 (2019) with respect to terrorism financing addresses this issue and affirms such regulation must be undertaken in compliance with international law obligations.

Considering these concerns, we urge the Ethiopian government to make amendments to the articles of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation to comply with the international law principle that demands legal clarity.¹⁰ The practical problems arising from terrorist laws are discussed below.

2. Trying Journalists and Activists on Terrorism Charges and at Terrorism Benches

The ‘war on terror’ that arose after the September 11 attacks in the United States triggered an expansion of international and domestic legal frameworks directed at the prevention of terrorism.¹¹ Despite the decline of terrorist acts in recent years, the expanded frameworks remain intact and are used by repressive regimes outside of anti-terror contexts. Since Ethiopia’s anti-terrorism law was adopted in 2009, the legislation has been used to stifle freedom of expression and charge dissenters, including opposition leaders, religious leaders, journalists, and independent media personnel. Since the enactment of the 2009 anti-terrorism law, numerous human rights violations have occurred under the pretense of counter-terrorism during the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) rule. Under this law, various human rights defenders have been sentenced and imprisoned for years, including human rights activists and veteran journalists Befikadu Hailu, Abel Wabella, Atnaf, Berhane, Temsgen Desalegn, Eskinder Nega and Reeyot Alemu.¹²

It is a common for governments to repress citizens’ rights to freedom of expression and use anti-terrorism legislation to do so, especially in countries like Ethiopia where the democratic system is not well-developed., Arresting human rights defenders and journalists under the Anti-Terrorism Law, taking them to court, detaining them for long periods without a verdict, and then releasing them after a prolonged court appointment is becoming very common. Most terrorism allegations made against journalists and human rights defenders By the public prosecutor are dismissed.

¹⁰ Kokkinakis v Greece (1993) 17 EHRR 397, 44–46

¹¹ Rebecca and George, “The new terrorists: the normalization and spread of anti-terror laws in Australia” (2014) 363

¹² Human Rights Watch, ‘Ethiopia: Terrorism Law Decimates Media’ (May 3, 2013) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/03/ethiopia-terrorism-law-decimates-media>> accessed July 25, 2023

The anti-terrorist law is undeniably vital for controlling and preventing terrorist attacks, but in practice, it is being exploited by the government to resolve political conflicts and differences. Despite the amendments to the draconian law in recent days, Ethiopia has witnessed trends where charges are filed against HRDs, including journalists, under anti-terrorism laws at anti-terror benches. The charges are often brought in specialized courts known as terrorism benches. In Ethiopia, the Federal High Court Lideta Division First Constitutional and Terrorism Criminal Bench is a well-known courthouse in this case, and terrorism charges have been filed against hundreds of HRDs. For instance, Amir Aman, a freelance video journalist who contributes to The Associated Press (AP), and Thomas Engida, a freelance camera operator for AP who has worked with various local outlets, were charged with terrorism charges on November 20, 2021, for allegedly interviewing a rebel group that operates in the western part of Ethiopia. After four months of detention, Amir Aman and his colleague were released, and their charges are currently dropped. In his Facebook post on April 16, 2022, Amir Aman wrote that he was released from prison and said that

“They told me that I have interviewed a group that the parliament has designated a terrorist, and it is an act of terrorism. I respond: what you call terrorism is what I call journalism. The crime I have committed is called journalism.”

Recently on 2023 more than 30 HRDs have been detained in Ethiopia and some of the HRDs most of them critical journalists are in detention allegedly charged with terrorism offenses under the new terrorism proclamation. HRDs among others, Meskerem Abera, Gobeze Sisay, Genet Asimamaw, Dawit Begashaw and lawyer Aleign Miheretu are allegedly accused of terrorism offenses.

The impact of filing charges against HRDs including journalists for terrorism offenses at terrorism benches is severe and wide-ranging, particularly in states with poor track records on human rights. It has a chilling effect on freedom of the press and discourages investigative reporting on sensitive issues, leading to self-censorship to avoid legal repercussions and heavy charges. This can significantly undermine the media's ability to fulfill its watchdog role and hold those in power accountable. Furthermore, the labeling of journalists and human rights defenders as terrorists damages their reputation and subjects them to public scorn and smear campaigns. This can additionally foster an atmosphere where their work is devalued, enabling authorities to more easily

disregard their grievances and undermine their endeavors to advance human rights, democracy, and social justice. It is evident that the conflation of journalism with terrorism poses a significant threat to freedom of expression in Ethiopia. By equating journalism with terrorism, authorities justify repressive measures against journalists. This not only undermines the fundamental human right to freedom of expression but also erodes public trust in the media and inhibits the free flow of information. The chilling effect is further exacerbated by the fear and self-censorship that journalists may experience when their work is unfairly associated with terrorism.

3. Human Rights Abuses against HRDs

Ethiopia is currently facing significant human rights violations, which encompass a crackdown on freedom of expression, arbitrary arrests and detentions, abductions, and restrictions on peaceful demonstrations and assemblies. These rights abuses persist as a significant concern in Ethiopia. These violations persist, undermining the fundamental principles of human rights, democratic values, and the rule of law. One of the prominent issues in Ethiopia has been the crackdown on freedom of expression. Restrictions on freedom of expression, both online and offline, are prevalent in Ethiopia. HRDs, including journalists, bloggers, and activists, face numerous challenges, which include censorship by detention, harassment, robbery, and intimidation through various tactics, including internet shutdowns and social media restrictions that curtail the free flow of information. Abductions have also been a cause for concern in Ethiopia. There have been reports of forced disappearances and targeted kidnappings of individuals, including social media influencers, activists, and journalists.¹³ These abductions often result in prolonged detentions without due process, leaving families and friends anxious and uncertain about the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones.

¹³ On April 25, 2023, social media influencer Mr. Tesfaye Hailemariam was abducted from his office by unknown parties, and his whereabouts were unknown for a day. His daughter on Tiktok asks in tears for the support of her Tiktok family to know the whereabouts of her father, saying that her father loves his country and is a person who stands for the rights of others.

3.1. Arbitrary Arrest and Censorship by Detention

HRDs play a vital role in promoting and protecting human rights, advocating for justice, and holding governments accountable. However, in Ethiopia, these defenders face significant challenges, including arbitrary arrests and detention as well as censorship, which hinder their crucial work.

In 2023, more than 30 HRDs, including activists and journalists, were detained . Among these HRDs, Meskerem Abera, Genet Asmamaw, Gobeze Sisay, Ermias Mekuria, Dawit Begashaw, Sisay Awgichew, Henok Addissie, Bekal Alamirew, and Abay Zewdu are still in detention. The cases of some of the detained HRDs, including Meskerem Abera, Genet Asmamaw, and Dawit Begashaw, have been covered in the first 2023 assessment. Meskerem Abera, an activist and founder of the EthioNikat YouTube-based media channel, was arrested on April 9, 2023, by 10 federal police officers in Addis Ababa and brought to court on April 11, 2023, after which the Federal First Instance Court gave her 13 days for the police to investigate. She has been detained multiple times before, and her arrest is the third since 2022. According to the charge sheet, Meskerem is accused of having discussions physically and on social media, speaking and taking a stand that the Amhara people are singled out, and committing crimes of “inciting violence and riot as well as giving shooting exercises for informal groups.”

Genet Asmamaw is another woman HRD who was detained on April 6, 2023, and managed to record her arrest in an audio recording by calling to her family while police dragged her from the office of Yeneta Media. The following Amharic translation of her record shows the situation of her arrest:

“Why am I being arrested for being a journalist?” Don't beat me. Why are you hitting me? Why are you kidnapping me without a court order?” says the journalist. Men's voices mock Asmamaw, calling her a “vile woman” and telling her to “shut up.” five Security men in civilian clothes are trying to take me away, saying they want me,” Asmamaw can be heard saying. “They are abusing me. They are insulting me. They are going to abduct me. They

are going to abduct me. I don't know where they are going to take me or what they are going to do to me, so tell me that I am kidnapped," she said to her family on the phone."¹⁴

On the phone, her abductors, who claimed to be upset by her speech, were heard shouting at her to stop talking on the phone and "Beat her, kick her," and other obscene insults were heard from her abductors; a copy of the recording was released on social media.¹⁵ The recording indicates the journalist was taken away in a vehicle, and she was later found in a police station. The journalist interviewed General Tefera Mamo, the former Commander of the Amhara Special Forces, who is ill and prohibited from going abroad to get medical treatment. The journalist brought this matter to the attention of the public. She is currently under detention, allegedly accused of terrorism charges.

Dawit Begashaw, whose case has been covered in the first 2023 assessment, is also in detention. Senayit Ayalew and Elias Debas, journalists from Ashara Media, an internet broadcaster, and Tewodros Asefaw, a journalist and activist from Ethio-Selam's YouTube based media channel were detained on April 13, 2023, and later released on April 27, 2023, and June 10, 2023, respectively. On July 20, 2023, the prominent journalist and critique Tewodros Asfaw has fled the country one month after his prison release. Moreover, Aleligne Mehretu, a defense lawyer for many HRDs was arrested on April 7, 2023 and later released on bail on 25 April 2023. Lawyer Aleligne Miheretu was detained as he was coming back from visiting his detained clients. The lawyer is charged with terrorism offenses similar to those his clients are accused of committing.

In addition, Asaye Derbie, a journalist by profession and an author and activist, was arrested on June 5, 2023, and later released on 10,000 ETB bail on July 18, 2023. Asaye has more than 200,000k followers on Facebook and owns "Teles" YouTube channel. He was released on October 2022 from his previous detention and later the court set him free after four months of trial. In his

¹⁴ Seid Mehammed, 'An audio recording exposed the security men who abducted the journalist, Gent Asmamaw' (Addis Zeybe, April 7, 2023) <<https://addiszeybe.com/featured/addis-ababa/politics/news/currentaffairs/an-audio-recording-exposed-the-security-men-who-abducted-the-journalist-gent-asmamaw>> accessed July 23, 2023; The Coalition For Women In Journalism, 'Ethiopia: Police Violently Arrest Two Amhara Women Journalists – CFWIJ Demands Immediate And Unconditional Release' (April 10, 2023) <<https://www.womeninjournalism.org/threats-all/ethiopia-police-violently-arrest-two-amhara-women-journalists>> accessed July 23, 2023

¹⁵ Seid Mehammed (n 14)

recent detention, the prosecutor files multiple charges against him, including charges based on Proc. No. 1185/2020 for disseminating disinformation to the public. According to an interview with Asaye he stated that there were problems regarding his arrest by security forces and challenges in exercising freedom of expression in Ethiopia. He stated the problems and challenges as follows:

“The arrest took place at night and in front of my children. I was arrested without a court order and my home was searched without a search warrant. I was brought to court after three days of detention. I am forced to stop my media work due to the lack of freedom of speech and repeated arrest. I am forced to sit without my job, because my electronic devices that I use for media work, including my laptop and phone, have been taken away by the police”.

Similarly, author and veteran journalist Temesgen Desalegn was detained twice during the period of this assessment, on May 20, 2023, and June 27, 2023. In his former detention, he was abducted at night by security forces in two pick-up trucks dressed in police uniforms while entering his home and was released after one day. In his later detention, he was released after hours of arrest. Also, Tesfaye Hialemariam, a social media influencer, and Melat Dawit, an artist, HRD, and social media influencer, were arrested on April 25 and May 23, 2023, respectively. The former was released on April 26, 2023, unconditionally, and the latter on June 3, 2023, with a 5,000 birr bail bond.

The situation mirrors a similar pattern of challenges for HRDs, particularly for journalists. HRDs are arrested in disregard of the law and charged with similar crimes. Many of them are arrested without a court warrant, often without being told their rights during their arrest, which include the reasons for their arrest, their right to remain silent, and other due process rights. In Ethiopia, the detention of HRDs and dissenters who exercise their freedom of expression has become the new normal and is being used as a strategy to ease current political tensions in an attempt to suppress dissenting voices, control the narrative, and maintain a semblance of stability. In this context, emergency laws and “command post” (De facto state of emergency) restrictions are used to ramp up the arrest of HRDs.

Moreover, conflation of journalistic work and critical commentary with criminal activity is normal among authorities in Ethiopia.¹⁶ Dozens of journalists were subjected to detentions and serious criminal charges, including terrorism charges, for exercising freedom of expression and doing their journalistic duties. Nevertheless, it is normal to drop charges after tensions ease, even if they were terrorism charges. This shows that the charges are only used to silence and create fear among HRDs. This trend signals a bad message to others, making them to self-censor or quit their work. Furthermore, there is a practice of keeping HRDs in custody and asking for more days to remand and investigate even if the courts allow bail. This serves as a tactic to prolong their detention without having formal charges filed against them. Also, the seizure of media equipment and forensic searches of journalists' and media organizations' digital equipment by security agencies have become a threat to freedom of expression, impacting the work of HRDs. Media equipment is essential for the realization of freedom of expression, and the arbitrary confiscation of these materials from HRDs is a violation of their rights.

Besides, the pattern of arrest of HRDs is conducted in violation of the laws of Ethiopia and international standards. The media law prohibits pre-trial detention of persons charged with committing an offense through the media.¹⁷ In general, the detention of HRDs is a concerning issue that requires attention and action to protect HRDs. Particularly the repeated detention of HRDs to ease current tensions sends a chilling message that dissent will not be tolerated and creates a culture of silence. The space for HRDs in Ethiopia has increased to shrink from time to time as a result of detention of HRDs. When HRDs including journalists are targeted and detained without due process, it undermines the principles of democracy and stifles the free flow of information.

3.2. Robbery on Media Houses

¹⁶ Jacey Fortin, 'Conflating terrorism and journalism in Ethiopia' (April 27, 2015) <<https://cpj.org/2015/04/attacks-on-the-press-conflating-terrorism-and-journalism-in-ethiopia/>> accessed July 27, 2023; Muthoki Mumo CPJ representative for Sub-Saharan Africa speech on the detention of journalists in Ethiopia <<https://www.voanews.com/a/ethiopia-gets-tough-on-journalists-since-tigray-conflict-/6683980.html>> accessed July 27, 2023

¹⁷ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021 Art. 86

In this digital age, where information is only a few clicks away, media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing societal developments.¹⁸ Media is also often hailed as the fourth estate and plays a vital role in upholding democracy and informing the public. Unfortunately, a new form of robbery has emerged in Ethiopia, that's media robbery. Ethiopia has witnessed several instances of targeted media robbery, which have had a significant impact on the country's media landscape. Targeted media robbery refers to the intentional theft or destruction of media equipment, facilities, or content with the aim of suppressing freedom of expression, silencing dissenting voices, or controlling the flow of information. Ethiopia has a complex history when it comes to media freedom. For many years, the country was under a repressive regime that tightly controlled the media and limited freedom of expression. However, in recent times, there have been efforts to liberalize the media sector and promote a more open and democratic environment through promulgating the new media proclamation No. 1238/2021.¹⁹ Despite these positive steps, targeted media robbery continues to pose a threat to press freedom in the country.

The motive behind targeted media robbery in Ethiopia can vary. In some cases, it is believed to be politically motivated, aimed at silencing critical voices or suppressing opposition media. Ethiopia has a history of political tensions and conflicts, and media outlets that are perceived as challenging the government's narrative often become targets. Moreover, targeted media robbery can also be driven by economic interests. Media outlets that are seen as competitors or are critical of powerful individuals or businesses may face attacks aimed at crippling their operations or forcing them out of the market. This not only affects media diversity but also undermines the public's right to access diverse sources of information.

The consequences of targeted media robbery are far-reaching. Firstly, it hampers the ability of journalists and media organizations to carry out their work effectively. Without proper equipment or facilities, journalists may struggle to gather and disseminate news, limiting the public's access to vital information. It also creates an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship, as journalists may be hesitant to report on sensitive or controversial issues for fear of retaliation. One notable case of targeted media robbery occurred on July 16, 2023, involving an online media news outlet called

¹⁸ Open book publisher, < <https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0014/chap06.html> > accessed August 25, 2023

¹⁹ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021

Ethiopia Insider, which is managed under Haq Media and Communication. Haq Media and Communication issued a statement on July 17, 2023, suggesting that the theft may be related to the significant pressure the media outlet has been facing due to daily reports. The robbers managed to steal valuable newsroom equipment, including three new digital cameras, two zoom lenses, four standard lenses, four laptops, and a smartphone, from Ethiopia Insider's headquarters in the Bole Medhanialem area. Ethiopia Insider staff members had worked until 4:00 p.m. the previous day and securely locked the premises before leaving. However, when the staff arrived next day early in the morning, they discovered that an unknown perpetrator had forcefully broken into the premises and stolen the valuable assets designated for the newsroom.

Tesfalem Waldyes, the co-founder and editor-in-chief of Ethiopia Insider, stated that;

“The company, established three years ago, had been expanding its content to include video news production. Unfortunately, this recent robbery incident has had a negative impact on their daily news production. Tesfalem mentioned that accurately assessing the worth of the stolen items is challenging, but pointed out that certain assets, such as video lenses, had been acquired less than a month ago. “For a small media company like us, the loss is substantial.”²⁰

This act of robbery is not the first time incident on Ethiopian Medias and human rights organizations. There have been other robberies of this nature before. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) and the Centre for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD), two locally registered civil society organizations, have previously been victims of targeted robbery.

Similarly online media outlet Ethio-251 media have been facing the same challenges before. As the owner of Ethio-251 Mulugeta Anberbir disclosed, unidentified thieves have completely robbed the offices of the Addis Ababa based online media outlet Ethio-251 media. In a Facebook post, Mulugeta said four modern cameras, a Neck-mic, Zoomer and other equipment were stolen during

²⁰ Ethiopia Insider, ‘A statement from Haq Media and Communication regarding the robbery in “Ethiopia Insider” office’ (July 17, 2023 <<https://ethiopiainsider.com/2023/11488/>> accessed August 25, 2023

the robbery which happened on the media house's studio in Arat-Kilo, central Addis Ababa. The stolen properties are reportedly worth 1.7 million birr (31,711 U.S. dollars) in total.²¹

The Ethio-251 studio was also reportedly being used by other media outlets such as Arat-Kilo and Negere-Wolqait prior to the robbery happening. Mulugeta pointed out that the robbery on the Ethio-251 studio which is located on the eighth floor of Dink-Sera building complex happened despite other entities including banks who had rented offices inside the building not being subjected to any robbery attempts for years. Mulugeta stated the robbery of the Ethio-251 studio was an attack on a media house that is a voice to the people. On March 5/2023, another online based media outlet, Yeneta-Tube was reportedly robbed of two of its modern office cameras allegedly by a staff member who hasn't still been arrested.

The Ethiopian Media Council also issued a statement on July 2, 2023 noting that several media establishments had been robbed or ransacked in the past six months. According to the council, equipment and property were stolen during the robberies.²²

The council said the robberies appeared to be targeted attacks on digital media, not random incidents. It called for a prompt investigation and for the perpetrators to be brought to justice. "The robberies seem coordinated as all the media targeted occurred on weekends, focused on media equipment, and showed no signs of forced entry," the council stated, describing the situation as alarming. Tamirat Hailu, Deputy Chairman of the Media Council, said the robberies came at a time when press freedom faced threats in Ethiopia. He noted that the government had cracked down on independent media in recent years by arresting and imprisoning journalists. "The items stolen from each office are the same and indicate a premeditated pattern," he explained. In a statement issued on July 20, 2023, the CPJ called the robbery a threat to the sector and a reminder of the risks faced by journalists in Ethiopia.

²¹ Mereja, 'Unidentified thieves rob Ethiopian media house: Report' (March 20, 2023) <<https://mereja.com/index/438129>> August 25, 2023

²²Addis Ababa Grid, 'Targeted Robberies' Against Press Provoke Anger, Demands For Investigator' <<https://addisababagrid.com/en/news/article/26256909/targeted-robberies-against-press-provoke-anger-demands-for-investigationer>> accessed August 25, 2023

3.3. Forced to Flee: Journalists in Exile

Journalism is undeniably the most important profession in a society which plays a crucial role in informing the public, holding those in power accountable, and fostering a functioning system. Journalists are often at the forefront, reporting on critical issues, uncovering corruption, and maladministration and speaking truth to power. However, this pursuit of truth often comes with great risks, as journalists become targets of oppression, persecution, and even violence. As a result, many find themselves forced to flee their home countries, becoming journalists in exile. The reasons that drive journalists into exile are varied but almost always stem from authoritarian regimes or oppressive governments. These journalists face threats, harassment, or imprisonment due to their reporting on sensitive topics such as human rights abuses, political corruption, or even official misconduct. In many cases, the oppressive governments view their work as a threat to their authority and power. Once their lives are endangered, journalists are often left with no choice but to leave their home countries. These journalists are forced to abandon their families, friends, and everything they hold dear in search of safety. Exile, while providing safety, takes away the passionate journalists' ability to report on their own communities, advocate for change, and hold those in power accountable.

In Ethiopia journalists are forced to leave their country under threat of imprisonment, torture, violence, or even death, because their work has angered the powerful. EHRDC documented the case of 4 journalists who were forced to flee from Ethiopia which include journalist Tewodros Asfaw, Yaye Sew Shimelis and Abebe Bayu. Previously journalist Tamerat Negera, the founder and Managing Editor of an online media Terara Network, went into Exile abroad on November 21, 2022 night with his wife, Selam Belay, General Manager of the media after repeated arrest and intimidation.²³

Journalist Tewodros Asfaw flees to neighboring country one month after he was released from prison. The journalist fled because of the persistent pressure and arrest he was encountering from Ethiopian authorities. Tewodros who was detained by security forces in mid-April 2023 was released on June 10, 2023 after a court granted him 15,000 birr (276 U.S. dollars) bail money. Tewodros is among dozens of journalists, academics, social media personalities and ordinary

²³ Addis Zeybe, 'Tamerat Negera went into exile again' (November 24, 2020) <<https://addiszeybe.com/tamerat-negera-went-into-exile-again>> accessed August 18, 2023

citizens arrested by Ethiopian authorities in April and later accused of terror offences. He had also been arrested in February spending several days in prison before being granted bail by another court. A former staff member at Abbay media and Addis Zeybe media outlets, he had recently founded a YouTube based media outlet called Ethio-Selam.

On the other hand, Yayeew Shimelis is also another prominent journalist who recently fled to Europe along with his friend Abebe Bayu. As posted in their Facebook page both journalists went into exile on June 21, 2023. Yayeew, on his Facebook page, referred the flee as “**Escape from death**” and stated the following:

“Until they forced me to open my door at night, covered my face, and took me somewhere mysterious, binding me with a dead body, I had no idea they would do this. They killed snakes and placed them in my chamber, subjecting me to a freezing house where rats and lizards roamed while spring water gushed. I had only encountered such stories in books until they brought to me, mutilating human bodies to extract information. They abandoned me in the forest at night, with no knowledge of the wilderness. It is a chapter of my life I have fervently prayed to avoid, persecution. I have never desired to flee but rather to reside in my beloved country with my cherished family and friends. Even after being arrested six times and subsequently released, the thought of leaving never crossed my mind. However, on the seventh arrest, I made a decision. As they exhibited all these horrors before me, they transported me to the tropical forest and cast me away, warning, ‘If you disclose any of what you have witnessed, we will kill you and feed you to the hyenas.’ I made a choice! After witnessing atrocities that surpassed even those described in Nazi literature, I resolved to depart.”

In Ethiopia, non-state affiliated media outlets are coming under relentless attacks as the government moves to stifle dissident voices. Besides journalist in exile also face diverse challenges. Firstly, they must navigate a new and foreign environment in which they often lack basic necessities such as shelter, food, and access to healthcare. Language barriers and cultural differences add to their struggles, making it difficult for them to reintegrate into society and find employment. Additionally, journalists in exile often face significant psychological trauma as a result of the threats and violence they experienced in their home countries. The constant fear and anxiety, coupled with the trauma of leaving their loved ones behind, can take a toll on their mental

well-being. Moreover, they may have to live with the constant fear of being monitored or spied on by the very governments they escaped from, further exacerbating their emotional distress.

Despite these challenges, journalists in exile continue to play a crucial role in shedding light on the situations in their home countries. They act as important sources of information for international media outlets, providing a unique perspective and first-hand accounts of human rights abuses and political turmoil. Their work helps to expose the truth, encourage international intervention, and maintain a global spotlight on the oppressive regimes they had to flee from.

3.4. Internet Shutdown and its Impact on Freedom of Expression

Internet shutdowns²⁴ have a widespread impact on billions of individuals globally, ranging from brief disruptions to prolonged outages. These shutdowns can be directed at a single platform or encompass entire networks. Despite their variations, the core truth remains constant: they infringe upon human rights.²⁵

Internet shutdowns interfere with the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, access to information and freedom of assembly, among many other rights. Not only are shutdowns an attack on fundamental rights, but they also have a severe negative impact on the economy, health care, education, and more. Internet shutdowns impeded individuals' ability to freely express their opinions and share information online. These shutdowns restrict access to social media, messaging platforms, and other online spaces where people communicate and exchange ideas. This limits the diversity of voices and opinions that contribute to healthy public discourse. The internet plays a vital role in documenting and disseminating information about human rights abuses. Shutting down the internet can obstruct the ability of human rights organizations, activists, and journalists to report on and raise awareness about violations, making it easier for governments to hide such

²⁴ An internet shutdown has been defined as “an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information.” An internet shutdown happens when someone – usually a government – intentionally disrupts the internet or mobile apps to control what people say or do. <<https://www.accessnow.org/no-internet-shutdowns-lets-keepiton/>>

²⁵ Access Now, ‘Internet shutdowns in 2021: the return of digital authoritarianism’ (2022) <<https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton-faq/#Key-stakeholder-groups/>> accessed August 11, 2023

actions from the international community. Internet disruptions, while not uncommon in Ethiopia, have traditionally been employed as a tactic to curtail freedom of expression, with varying rationales provided by governments. In essence, the utilization of internet shutdowns by the Ethiopian authorities lacked the necessary justification and operated without adherence to established legal or policy standards. The suspicion that these shutdowns aimed to suppress public critiques of the government is further underscored by the absence of transparency and refusal to furnish explanations.²⁶

In the first week of April, internet access was restricted in some areas of the Amhara region due to the chaos following the government's attempts to disarm the Amhara regional Special Forces. Apart from broadband connections, internet connectivity was completely constrained in significant urban areas of Amhara, including Gondar, Bahir Dar, and Woldia.²⁷ This ban is a continuation of an internet shutdown made effective from February 9, which also led users to only be able to access social networks via a virtual private network (VPN). This restriction was lifted after five months on July 17 Monday evening local time.²⁸ However, it was reinstated for a brief time when the national entrance exams for 12th graders were imminent. The accessibility of the internet throughout Ethiopia was suspended as a precautionary measure against the potential leakage of national exam papers online. According to statements made by a government spokesperson, this shutdown was enacted to avert a recurrence of incidents where exam materials were leaked in preceding years.

²⁶ 'Freedom of Opinion and Expression and Sustainable Development -Why Voice Matters' <<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/expression/cfis/sustainable-development/subm-sustainable-development-freedom-of-expression-csos-maat-for-peace-41.pdf>> accessed August 11, 2023

²⁷ Getahun Asnake, 'Internet Blackout in Major Amhara Region Cities' (*Addis Zeybe*, April 10, 2023) <<https://addiszeybe.com/featured/gonder/currentaffairs/internet-blackout-in-major-amhara-region-cities>> accessed 11 August 2023

²⁸ Addis Standard, 'Ethiopian Government Lifts Internet Restrictions on Major Social Media Platforms' (July 18, 2023) <<https://addisstandard.com/asdailycoop-ethiopian-government-lifts-internet-restrictions-on-major-social-media-platforms/>> accessed 11 August 2023

The imposition of limitations had garnered disapproval from organizations advocating for human rights. Daniel Bekele, the Chief Commissioner of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), spoke that restriction placed on specific social media platforms directly infringes upon citizen's right to freedom of expression and access to information. Aligning with these concerns, the Ethiopian Media Council (EMC) added its voice on March 3, 2023, expressing reservations about the hindrance and urging the government to halt the recurrent practice of blocking social media platforms. The prohibition of access to social media applications such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube has led for the country to experience a financial setback of over \$140 million. This estimation comes from the Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD Ethiopia), an organization advocating for the removal of these limitations.

Internet shutdowns imposed by governments can have a significant and detrimental impact on HRDs and the quality of their work. These shutdowns not only hinder their ability to communicate and collaborate effectively but also curtail their capacity to document, report, and advocate for human rights violations. The repercussions of shut shutdowns are multi-faceted. Internet shutdowns disrupt the ability of HRDs to communicate with each other and with international networks. This can hinder the coordination of efforts, joint campaigns, and the sharing of vital information, strategies, and best practices. HRDs heavily rely on the internet to access information about human rights violations, legal developments, and global trends. Shutdowns deny them access to critical data, reports, and updates, weakening their capacity to stay informed and effectively advocating for change. The lack of online platforms to communicate securely may force them to resort to riskier offline methods, potentially compromising their safety.

In conclusion, the recurring pattern of internet shutdowns in Ethiopia underscores a concerning trend that impacts fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression, access to information, and democratic participation.

3.5. Restriction on Right to Assembly

The Right of Peaceful Assembly is a fundamental human right that constitutes the very foundation of a system of participatory governance based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law which enables individuals to express themselves collectively and to participate in shaping their

societies.²⁹ This right is recognized under Article 30 of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution and includes the right to demonstration and petition.³⁰ According to the Human Rights Committee General Comment No. 37, the right of peaceful assembly may take many forms, including demonstrations, protests, meetings and rallies that can be used as a tool to recognize and realize a wide range of other rights, including economic, social and cultural rights. The committee noted that states not only have the obligation to allow such assemblies to take place without unwarranted interference, but also to facilitate the exercise of this right and to protect participants.³¹

Despite the recognition of the right to assembly in Ethiopian laws, the practice lacks compliance with national and international laws. On April 30, 2023, the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU) was prohibited to celebrate the annual May Day celebration that it planned for May 1, 2023. It was planned to be celebrated with different activities including demonstrations to voice the workers concerns. However, the planned rally was cancelled though CETU made Media announcements regarding the overall program. CETU in its Facebook page posted a letter announcing the cancelation of the program which reads:

“It has been announced and broadcasted a press conference regarding the festival and general program that CETU made the necessary preparations to celebrate the 48th May Day in Addis Ababa and its branch offices with a peaceful demonstration. We are forced to cancel the program scheduled to celebrate on the May Day because the Addis Ababa Security Bureau has prohibited us. We ask you to convey this message to the Ethiopian employees through your media.”³²

The right to freedom of peaceful assembly encompasses the right to hold meetings. However, it has become increasingly common in Ethiopia for authorities or state organs to prohibit assemblies

²⁹ Human Rights Committee (HRC), General comment No. 37 (2020) on the right of peaceful assembly (article 21) Para. 1

³⁰ FDRE Constitution, Federal Negarit Gazeta, 1st Year No. 1, dated 21 August 1995.

³¹ HRC, (n 29) Para. 8

³² CETU Letter, ‘የሰራተኞች ቀን (ሜይ ደዴይ) በዓል መሰረተን ስለመግለፅ’ (22/08/2015 E.C) <https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02GPZQxhfwoPmRhi5rwFa6SDjpYfWMpjNsNehnJwZ5KwmWwyc1vcwXeWb7rMradmcf1&id=100008632024841&mibextid=Nif5oz> accessed August 2, 2023

and meetings in violation of the constitution. The Addis Ababa City Administration has imposed explicit restrictions on conducting meetings without obtaining prior permission from the administration. The origins of these prohibitions remain unclear, but civil society organization (CSO) meetings have been impeded both directly and indirectly by the authorities. Indirectly, hotels are imposing a prohibition on civil society organizations (CSOs) by requiring them to present permission to reserve meeting halls, as they have been warned to do so by the authorities. In a direct manner, the city administration required that CSOs or anyone holding meetings must obtain permission in advance before conducting any meetings.

An example of this occurred on May 17, 18, and 19, 2023, when the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC) encountered difficulties in obtaining permission from the sub-city and city administrations to reserve meeting halls for a training session on human rights defenders in Addis Ababa. EHRDC expressed their concerns and dissatisfaction in a letter addressed to the Bole sub-city administration, followed by a letter to the Addis Ababa City Administration, stating that the decision to require permission was both unusual and illegal, as it infringed upon constitutionally guaranteed rights. Despite the challenges, EHRDC proceeded with the meetings and trainings. It is worth noting that according to Article 9 of the constitution, any law, decision made by a state organ, or action taken by a public official that contradicts the constitution holds no legal effect. Therefore, the direct and indirect prohibitions outlined above are in violation of the Constitution.

3.6. Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)

Women around the world have played a crucial role in advancing human rights.³³ Some women identify themselves as WHRDs others tend not to due to unfamiliarity with the term or, for their own safety, deliberately avoid promoting their work under such a label.³⁴ Despite this, WHRDs

³³ United Nations, ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights Defenders’ (Human Rights Council Fortieth session, A/HRC/40/60 (10 January 2019) Para. 1

³⁴ Amie Lajoie, ‘Challenging assumptions of vulnerability: the significance of gender in the work, lives and identities of women human rights defenders (February 2018) 89 University of Galway <https://aran.library.nuigalway.ie/bitstream/handle/10379/7141/Lajoie%20Thesis_Final.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> accessed August 05, 2023

play an important role in different aspects of life³⁵, particularly fighting for gender equality and in the defense of women's rights. In Ethiopia, WHRDs are playing an important role in promoting and protecting women's rights by shaping their society in various ways. One of the crucial works played by WHRDs in Ethiopia is seeking justice for the prevalent gender-based violence crimes. In this regard, WHRDs in Ethiopia actively work to address these issues by advocating for the rights of women, raising awareness about GBV, providing support and services to survivors, documenting cases, and pushing for accountability. However, they face numerous challenges in their pursuit of justice for GBV crimes. Threats and attacks of WHRDs as a result of their activism is the common practice. They are often targeted by individuals, groups, perpetrators relatives who seek to silence their voices and obstruct their efforts. Such threats create a hostile environment and make it challenging for WHRDs to continue their work safely.

Abebayehu Geta, a human rights defender, has been facing online threats due to his advocacy efforts on behalf of Tsega Belachew, an accountant who was abducted in Hawassa city on may 23, 2023. He has received direct calls from authorities, bulky of insulting, degrading and intimidating inboxes and comments on Facebook and a campaign by local activists against him. Abebayew is not only an advocate for Tsega, but he also actively champions the rights of women through legal representation of women who have experienced various forms of injustice. In addition to Abebayehu Geta, various women's rights activists and individuals who oppose the abduction of girls and women in Hawassa city have also been subjected to online threats and intimidation. These online threats and intimidation tactics are aimed at instilling fear, discouraging their activism, and preventing them from raising awareness about the issue. By targeting these HRDs, the individuals or groups responsible for the threats attempt to create a chilling effect, where others may hesitate to join the cause or express their support.

The other prominent women human rights defender is Atikilt Janka is the other prominent WHRD. She has been involved professionally in advocating for the human rights of women and girls for almost 12 years. She established and led Talita Rise Up, a Civil Society Organization that helps women and girls find safe refuge from any type of discrimination, harassment, or violence. The organization provides shelter for survivors of Gender-Based Violence and related issues, and

³⁵ Mahlet Abreham, 'defending her voice: a quest on Women Human Rights Defenders in Ethiopia' (2022) XIII Ethiopian Human Rights Law Series 182

promotes human rights, awareness of GBV, support for the role of women and girls in their communities, engagement with governmental sectors in increasing the inclusivity of women in decision-making processes. However, recently she faced both online and offline intimidation and harassments. She was told to drop the case of a girl their organization was closely following up in the court, and a group of men come to her office and told her to withdraw the case at court and live peacefully, unless she will face a challenges. Furthermore she also repeatedly threatened through phone calls to stop her work. It is clear that this was a threat and an attempt to intimidate her from pursuing justice for the girl and women who are victim of right violation. Despite the risks they face, these WHRDs and their supporters remain resilient in their commitment to combating GBV and advocating for the rights of girls and women.³⁶ The abduction and other sexual abuse and harassment against women and the subsequent online threats and intimidation faced by those who spoke against the incident highlight the importance of protecting human rights defenders and promoting the rights of women.

3.7. Human Rights Defenders with Disability

In Addis Ababa construction projects are resulting in the demolition of houses and stores including dwellings and trading establishments. This initiative is believed to be part of the city's rebuilding plan, which had been delayed for a considerable period due to public opposition and outcry.³⁷ The demolition of commercial houses in Addis Ababa has had far-reaching consequences, particularly for individuals who rely on these establishments for their daily livelihoods. Among those most affected are Persons with disabilities, whose lives have been significantly impacted by these demolitions.

In relation to this, more than 160 individuals with disabilities have lodged a complaint with the Rights Commission, citing violations of their rights in relation to the demolition of commercial houses by the City of Addis Ababa. As we observed the situation, on May 22, 2023, the persons appeared at the Commission's headquarters and submitted their complaint to the commission. These complainants, who are persons with disabilities, assert that the demolition of commercial properties has had a significant impact on their lives and livelihoods. The destruction of these

³⁶ Phone Interview with Ababayehu Geta August 13, 2023

³⁷ The Reporter, 'Demolition sweeping Addis' <<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/32197/>> accessed March 18, 2023

establishments has resulted in the loss of employment opportunities, as well as the disruption of services and support systems they relied on. By submitting their complaint to the Commission, these individuals seek to draw attention to the alleged violations of their rights and advocate for proper compensation, alternative livelihood options, and the protection of their interests in the face of these demolitions. Rigbe Gebrehawaria, EHRC Commissioner for Disability Rights and the Rights of Older Persons accepted their complaint and noted in a statement that the process of demolishing commercial buildings should be done in accordance with the legal system and considering the social, economic and psychological crisis that it may cause especially to the disabled and the elderly.³⁸ According to the complaint the human rights defenders were harassed and abused by the security forces at the government institutions where they went to lodge their complaints.

Such actions by security forces are deeply concerning and raise serious questions about the protection of human rights and the treatment of individuals with disabilities. The harassment and abuse experienced by human rights defenders with disabilities not only undermines their efforts to seek justice but also highlights the obstacles they face in their advocacy work. It demonstrates the need for effective safeguards to protect the rights and safety of individuals with disabilities, especially when they engage in activities to promote and defend human rights.

³⁸ Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, ‘በአዲስ አበባ ከተማ የንግድ ቤቶችን ከማፍረስ ሂደት ጋር በተያያዘ አካል ጉዳተኞች ለኢሰመኮ ያቀረቡትን አቤቱታ በተመለከተ’ (May 23, 2023)

4. Conclusion

The periodic assessment has found that the situation of human rights remains challenging, with human rights defenders and journalists facing a range of risks and threats, including harassment, intimidation, violence, and arbitrary detention. Human rights defenders and journalists continue to be targeted by state and non-state actors. Human rights defenders working on issues related to the conflict, GBV and other rights in different parts of the country have been at risk. Journalists have faced increasing restrictions on their work, including self-censorship, and intimidation. There have also been reports of journalists being arbitrarily detained and harassed. The enabling environment for human rights defenders and journalists has deteriorated. The rights of freedom of expression, the state of emergency in effect in several parts of the country is increasing the risks of HRDs. As there are so many gaps and violation of rights in the current state of emergency, EHRDC is documented incidents, and it will be covered under the next Assessment.

5. Recommendations

Considering these facts and findings, EHRDC wishes to provide the following recommendations to concerned organs and make an appeal to ensure the protection of human rights defenders:

- **End arbitrary actions and detentions:** EHRDC remains concerned about the arbitrary arrests, unlawful and prolonged detention, threats, and attacks against HRDs and calls the government to adhere to the rule of law by complying with the constitution, media law, and procedural laws of Ethiopia while arresting and detaining HRDs including journalists.
- **Ensure fundamental freedoms:** The Ethiopian government should prioritize and safeguard fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, press freedom and freedom of assembly. This involves creating an enabling environment for journalists to work without fear of persecution, harassment, or censorship and an end to target people based on their exercise of these freedoms.
- **International Support and Advocacy:** The international community, including governments, human rights organizations, and media watchdogs, should actively engage in advocating for the protection of HRDs in Ethiopia. This can involve raising awareness about the challenges faced by HRDs and providing support to independent local media organizations and HRDs at risk.
- **Promoting Dialogue:** Engaging in open and constructive dialogue between the government, HRDs, and media organizations can help address underlying issues and promote a conducive environment for HRDs, particularly journalism. EHRDC urges media authorities including professional associations and CSOs to exert pressure and create a dialogue with the government to end the situation.
- **Supporting Journalists in Exile:** International actors should provide support and resources to journalists who have fled Ethiopia due to threats or persecution. This can include legal assistance, temporary shelter, access to healthcare, and opportunities for professional development.