



EHRDC SECOND ANNUAL REPORT

The Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Ethiopia : 2023



JANUARY 2024

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For reprint permission and information, please direct your inquiry to EHRDCenter@ethdefenders.org

Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC) Bole Sub-city, Woreda 02

Friendship Business Center, 5th Floor, 504 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Tel: +251-94985871

Email: EHRDCenter@ethdefenders.org Website: <https://ethdefenders.org/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ethdefenders> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/CenterEHRD>

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/ethiopian-human-rights-defenders-center/

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EHRDC remains committed to its mission of promoting and protecting the rights of HRDs, and it is through the collaboration and support of these organizations, HRDs, and individuals that such endeavors can be effectively pursued.

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Abbreviations

ACHPR: African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights

CARD: Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy

CETU: Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions

CPJ: Committee to Protect Journalists

CSOs: Civil Society Organizations

ECSOC: Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council

EHRC: Ethiopian Human Rights Commission

EHRCO: Ethiopian Human Rights Council

EHRDC: Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center

EMC: Ethiopian Media Council

ENDF: Ethiopian National Defense Force

EOTC: Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

EWLA: Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association

FDRE: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

GBV: Gender Based Violence

HRDs: Human Rights Defenders

ICCPR: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

IDP: Internally Displaced Persons

RSF: Reporters Without Borders

TPLF: Tigray People Liberation Front

UDHR: Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UN: United Nations

WHRDs: Women Human Rights Defenders

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 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), from December 9 -13, 2019, 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.

About this report

One of the main goals of EHRDC is to familiarize the broader society with the concept of HRDs and their protection. Accordingly, EHRDC conducts periodic assessments on the situations of human rights defenders in Ethiopia. This report compiles the four periodic assessments conducted in 2023. The report shows the state of human rights and the situation of HRDs in the country. All the periodic assessments are published on EHRDC’s website <https://ethdefenders.org>.

Message from the Executive Director

“The trend of targeting HRDs and silencing critical voices will have a negative impact on the democratization process of the country and severely affect the civic space and political environment. I hope that all stakeholders, particularly the government of Ethiopia as a duty bearer, will give sufficient attention to our recommendations and work towards improving the protection of human rights in general and the situation of HRDs in particular.”

As the Executive Director of the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC), it is an honor and a privilege to present our 2nd annual report on the situation of human rights defenders (HRDs) on this important day, as our Center celebrates its 3rd year of establishment and journey in supporting and defending HRDs in Ethiopia.

The year 2023 was full of unprecedented challenges and alarming situations for Ethiopian HRDs. At least 50 HRDs faced arbitrary detention, abduction, harassment, intimidation, denial of their basic and fundamental rights and freedoms. Five HRDs were forced to leave the country for fear of their lives after being released from detention, while others faced life-threatening situations. Since its establishment in November 2019, EHRDC has received and documented several cases of HRDs facing various risks. Our documentation and assessments clearly indicate an increasing threat against the work of HRDs and the civic space in general. In 2023, the EHRDC compiled and released three periodic assessment reports on the situation of HRDs and one special assessment report on the pattern of HRD detention since 2020, titled: “Censorship by Detention: A Look at the Detention of Human Rights Defenders in Ethiopia Since 2020.”

Following the signing of the Pretoria peace agreement between the Federal Government and TPLF, we hoped that the cycle of violence and atrocities would end and that victims of human rights violations would receive justice. We also anticipated that the situation of human rights defenders would gradually improve, considering that the end of hostility and conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia tends to create a better environment for addressing concrete political, social, and economic issues in the country and for promoting human rights. Despite our anticipation of the difficulties in settling all humanitarian crises that occurred during the conflict and the challenges in promoting and protecting human rights in a post-conflict situation, we encouraged HRDs to confront the post-conflict situation by continuing their positive contributions to improving the human rights situation in the country. Many HRDs played a significant role in advancing humanitarian support in conflict areas, advocating for the accountability of perpetrators, monitoring and documenting atrocities, conducting assessments on various thematic areas, and particularly assessing the impact of the conflict, primarily on (Conflict Related Sexual Violence) CRSV. For instance, our Center conducted an in-depth assessment of the reporting, documentation, and investigation of CRSV. The

assessment's overall aim was to provide an overview of the current reporting, documentation and investigation of CRSV in selected IDP locations in the Afar, Amhara, and Oromia regional states and to inform further interventions on CRSV.

As we have highlighted in our periodic assessments, the situation of HRDs cannot be seen separately from the overall promotion and protection of human rights in the country. Accordingly, all our researches and periodic assessment reports cover not only the situation of HRDs but also the general human rights situation in the country. Since August 2023, under the pretext of the declared State of Emergency, which is still in effect in January 2024, at least 20 HRDs, including activists, lawyers, and journalists, have been arbitrarily detained and held without due process of law. In general, this 2nd annual assessment report demonstrates that targeting HRDs during conflict and emergency situations has become a new norm. HRDs are particularly vulnerable to harassment, intimidation, arbitrary arrest, and detention, especially during states of emergency.

It is unfortunate to witness the continued use of detention as a tool to silence critical voices and suppress dissent under the current administration of the Ethiopian government. We have well-documented cases of HRDs in our assessment reports, which show that most arrests of HRDs have been carried out under vague and broad legal provisions, often related to national security, attempts to overthrow the government, creating mistrust between the government and the people, and counterterrorism. This trend of targeting HRDs and silencing critical voices will have a negative impact on the democratization process of the country and severely affect the civic space and political environment. I hope that all stakeholders, particularly the government of Ethiopia as a duty bearer, will give sufficient attention to our recommendations and work towards improving the protection of human rights in general and the situation of HRDs in particular. Like the past three years, EHRDC renews its commitment and advances its systemic advocacy work for the protection HRDs through its three pillar areas of focus: upgrading the capacity of HRDs through training, providing protection support, and strategic advocacy at national, regional, and international levels.

Methodology

This annual report adopts a qualitative approach to assess the situation of HRDs and provide an in-depth analysis of their status in Ethiopia. The report utilizes both primary and secondary data collection methods. In terms of primary data, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with HRDs. The analysis of the situation is conducted based on national and international laws, as well as case laws from human rights bodies. Relevant legal instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are employed to analyze the HRDs' situation. Additionally, the report gives particular importance to soft laws, primarily focusing on the declaration on HRDs, which provides detailed rights for HRDs. Special rapporteurs' reports, resolutions, and fact sheets are also utilized to assess the situation of HRDs.

Regarding secondary data, open-source evidence and materials, such as credible news reports, analyses, and posts from HRDs' personal social media accounts, as well as of the Ministry of Justice, are used. This report is the outcome of ongoing monitoring activities and follow-up efforts to assess the situation of HRDs through periodic assessments. Data collection methods include observation, interviews, and surveys using questionnaires. For this report, interviews were conducted with various individuals, including CSO leaders, journalists, individual HRDs, activists, and lawyers. Interviews given by HRDs about their arrests, found in media platforms, were also examined. The selection of HRDs for interviews was based on their personal experiences of risks related to their human rights work and the likelihood of obtaining relevant data to illustrate the situation of HRDs in the country. CSOs were selected based on the risks they face, their involvement in peace initiatives, and any threats they may have encountered. Interviews with CSOs were conducted with their executive directors/directresses, as they were deemed to have a better understanding of the organizations.

It should be noted that the report has limitations in terms of providing a detailed account of the situation across the entire country. Therefore, the report aims to highlight trends in the country, and the findings, conclusions, and recommendations should be interpreted within that context.

Executive Summary

The annual report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC) for the year 2023 provides a comprehensive assessment of the situation of human rights defenders (HRDs) in Ethiopia. The report utilized a qualitative approach, incorporating primary data from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with HRDs and secondary data from open-source evidence, credible news reports, and social media accounts of HRDs and others. The report aims to showcase trends and developments related to the protection and promotion of human rights in Ethiopia, with a particular focus on the challenges faced by HRDs.

The findings of the report indicate an alarming increase in threats, attacks, and harassment against HRDs in Ethiopia during the year 2023. At least 50 HRDs were subjected to arbitrary detention, abduction, harassment, intimidation, and violations of their fundamental rights and freedoms. Using detention to silence critical voices and suppress dissent has become a concerning trend. The report also found that the declaration of state of emergency in August 2023 led to the arbitrary detention of dozens of HRDs without due process of law. It revealed that vague and broad legal provisions related to national security, attempts to overthrow the government, creating mistrust, and counterterrorism were often used as justifications for these detentions.

Furthermore, the report highlights the issue of forced exile, with some HRDs being compelled to leave the country for fear of their lives after being released from detention. This forced exile not only deprives Ethiopia of valuable human rights advocates but also reflects the dire situation faced by HRDs in the country. The report emphasizes the culture of impunity that persists in Ethiopia, with a lack of accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations against HRDs. This culture of impunity perpetuates attacks and harassment against HRDs, fostering a climate of fear and intimidation. In light of the findings, the report puts forth recommendations to address the challenges encountered by HRDs in Ethiopia. The key recommendations encompass ending arbitrary detentions, respecting the rule of law, ensuring accountability, and establishing a safe space for HRDs.

Recommendations

To the government of Ethiopia:

- EHRDC remains concerned about the arbitrary arrests, unlawful and prolonged detentions, threats, and attacks against HRDs. Therefore, EHRDC urges the Ethiopian government to ensure prompt and impartial investigations into threats and violence against human rights defenders, hold alleged perpetrators accountable, and put an end to impunity.
- The government should enact legislation to protect HRDs and implement the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders by integrating it with national policies and strategies.
- The government should comply with its international human rights obligations including during emergency declarations by adhering to the principles of legality, legitimacy, necessity and proportionality while arresting persons including HRDs.
- The 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.
- The government should release those unlawfully detained HRDs.

To the international community

- This includes 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.
- 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.

To the media authorities

- 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, and the journalism profession in general. EHRDC urges media authorities including professional associations and CSOs to exert pressure and create a dialogue with the government to end the situation.

1. Contextual Assessment

On November 2, 2022, the Ethiopian federal government and leaders of the country's Tigray region agreed to end two years of devastating armed conflict. This peace agreement marked the end of a two-year-long armed conflict and paves the way for peace and improvement in human rights in the Tigray region. In the deal, the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) committed to laying down arms within 30 days, allowing the federal government to regain control of the region. On March 17, 2023, the Tigray Regional State, led by the TPLF, established an Interim Regional Administration as per Article 10 of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities agreement.

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. 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 In less than a year after the signing of the Pretoria Agreement in November 2022, which aimed to address the longstanding crisis impacting Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions, the Amhara region has experienced significant unrest and instability. This followed the announcement by the federal government of the dissolution of the special regional and paramilitary forces on April 6, 2023. The decision was met with widespread protests, violence, resulting in civilian killings in the Amhara region. On April 6, 2023, clashes erupted between the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and Fano militias in the North Wollo zone, Amhara region and continued across other areas of the region. From August 2, 2023, armed clashes between the ENDF and Fano militias continued across the Amhara region, leading to displacements and civilian casualties. Following this, the federal government declared a state of emergency in the Amhara region on August 4, 2023.

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

On the other hand, serious human rights violations including mass and extra-judicial killings, violence, and mass displacement of civilians have been occurring in various areas of the Oromia region. Hundreds of civilians were brutally killed, and an unknown number of people were hijacked, injured in attacks by various armed groups in the region. Furthermore, eviction has been a contentious issue in the region, with many people facing forceful evictions due to house demolitions by authorities in the newly formed Sheger City surrounding the capital, Addis Ababa. In the region, since 2019, government forces and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) armed group referred as “Shene” by the government have been fighting in western Oromia, resulting in serious abuses. Amidst continued clashes, peace talks began between the government and the OLA armed group, after years of conflict in May 2023. However, the peace talks ended without a deal, and civilian suffering continued in the region.²

In addition, ethnic based conflicts were erupted in the Gambella region, resulting in death, destruction, and displacement at different times in the year 2023. On July 18, 2023, there were armed clashes between groups in Gambella region that caused civilian lives. According to reports, the conflict caused severe human rights violations, allegedly resulting in the deaths of 24 people.³ 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 HRDs, exposing them to risks and threats from authorities. Moreover, tensions which caused civilian casualties have arisen in different parts of the country, including the southern region that stem from self-administration request such as the Gurage people’s claim for statehood and lack of basic services.⁴ It is in this context, that this annual report is prepared to document the situation of HRDs in Ethiopia in the year 2023.

² Addis Standard, ‘Gov’t, OLA second round talks in Tanzania end without agreement, again’ (November 21, 2023) <<https://addisstandard.com/newsalert-govt-ola-second-talks-in-tanzania-end-without-agreement-again/>> accessed November 29, 2023

³ 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 July 20, 2023

⁴ Biruk Alemu, ‘Security forces kill six, injure more than 15 people in Wolkite following protest against chronic lack of water’ (Addis Standard, February 16, 2023) <<https://addisstandard.com/news-security-forces-kill-six-injure-more-than-15-people-in-wolkite-following-protest-against-chronic-lack-of-water/>> accessed November 25, 2023

2. Peace Deal: An end to Two years of Conflict and Civil Society Engagement

On November 2022, a peace deal was signed between the TPLF forces and the Ethiopian federal government, raising hopes for the people of Ethiopia, particularly those displaced and severely affected by the conflict. The United Nations (UN) regarded it as an important first step towards lasting peace.⁵ This is because the peace agreement has improved the situation, allowing humanitarian agencies to deliver more aid to areas that were previously difficult to access during the hostilities.⁶

Two months after the signing of the peace deal, a group of civil society organizations (CSOs), including the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC), visited Mekelle, the capital city of Tigray regional state. The visit was led by the Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council (ECSOC), which has more than 4000 Ethiopia-based CSOs as members.⁷ According to the director of the council, the visit aimed to create awareness of the current humanitarian aid delivery and the possibility of working with CSOs in Tigray. The group of CSOs consulted with peer organizations in the region and visited Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps on the outskirts of Mekelle. EHRDC also met with human rights defenders and checked in with members in the region. In essence, the cessation of hostilities and the peace deal has created a good atmosphere for national CSOs to interact with counterparts in the region, provide assistance, and explore ways to speed up humanitarian aid delivery and rehabilitation efforts.

Moreover, in January 2023, three out of the five journalists who had been detained for several months in Mekelle were released. These were Misgna Seyoum, Teshome Temalew, and Haben Halefom. They had been detained by local authorities in May 2022 for allegedly “collaborating and disseminating enemy propaganda.” Nevertheless, two journalists, Hailemichael Gesesse and Dawit Mekonnen, were in police custody but later released March

⁵ UN News, ‘Ethiopia: Peace agreement between Government and Tigray a critical first step’ Guterres <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130137>> accessed April 13, 2023

⁶ Moulid Hujale, ‘Northern Ethiopia peace deal restores hope for displaced’ (UNHCR February 08, 2023) <<https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2023/2/63e3aa3a4/northern-ethiopia-peace-deal-restores-hope-displaced.html>> accessed March 10, 2023

⁷ Ethiopian Monitor, ‘group of Civil Society Organizations Visit Tigray’ (January 24, 2023) <<https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2023/01/24/group-of-civil-society-organizations-visit-tigray/>> accessed March 10, 2023

19, 2023. All five of the journalists were assigned to their work by the Tigray interim regional administration, which was appointed by the federal government during its control of the Tigray region, including Mekelle, from 28 November 2020 to 28 June 2021.⁸

The conflict, fueled by growing ethnic animosity and power struggles, had a devastating impact on the country, particularly in the northern part of Ethiopia, which includes Tigray, Amhara, and Afar. The conflict was accompanied by serious human rights violations and a crackdown on CSOs. Although the peace agreement has not yet been fully implemented, relative peace seems to have prevailed despite some controversies regarding its implementation. However, after the peace agreement was signed, which put an end to the northern conflict, tensions erupted over various issues in Ethiopia. These include religion, forced evictions, and arbitrary detentions of human rights defenders (HRDs).

3. Human Rights Abuses: Arbitrary Detentions, Killings and Forced Evictions

3.1. Incidents in relation to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and Celebration of Adawa Victory and Evictions in Oromia Regional State and Addis Ababa

On January 22, 2023, in a small rural church outside the town of Woliso, three Archbishops of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (“EOTC”), uncanonically consecrated 26 monks as “bishops” and proclaimed a new and separate “Orthodox Synod” for the Oromia regional state and other areas of Ethiopia’s south along ethnic lines.⁹ This act was done without authority from the Holy Synod and without the presence of his Holiness, Patriarch Abune Mathias. However, on January 26, 2023, the church revoked the act as “against the church’s canonical orders” and excommunicated the dissidents. Unfortunately, following this incident, a number of human rights violations have been committed by state and non-state actors, resulting in the loss of many citizens’ lives.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, in a statement released on February 10, 2023,

⁸ Mihret G/kristos, ‘Three of five Tigray TV journalists released after eight months in detention, defense lawyer laments court procedure’ (Addis Standard, January 17, 2023) <<https://addisstandard.com/news-three-of-five-tigray-tv-journalists-released-after-eight-months-in-detention-defense-lawyer-laments-court-procedure/>> accessed March 10, 2023

⁹ Solomon Kibriye and Tesfa Mikael Williams, ‘Crisis in Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’ (February 7, 2023) <<https://ocpsociety.org/crisis-in-ethiopian-orthodox-tewahedo-church/>> accessed March 12, 2023

noted that the security forces of Oromia regional state used excessive force against the followers of the main church. This included extrajudicial killings, beatings, harassment and arbitrary arrests, resulting in the death of many people.¹⁰ Furthermore, believers, journalists from the church media and those who spoke out against the killings were arrested and detained in Addis Ababa and Oromia regional state. According to the lawyers of EOTC, over 200 believers have been arrested and taken to a detention center in Addis Ababa and Oromia at the time. The commission in its statement also highlighted the killing of eight people in the town of Shashemene.

Moreover, after the 2023 Adwa Victory Day celebration in Addis Ababa, government security forces committed several human rights violations resulting in one death. Adwa Victory Day is a national holiday in Ethiopia, which is observed on March 2 every year to celebrate Ethiopia's victory over Italy in the year 1896. During the celebration, there was a peaceful gathering of people around Menelik Square and a religious congregation in the nearby Saint George Church. However, when the security forces attempted to disperse the huge gatherings, the event turned into a clash between the celebrants and the security personnel. In its press release on March 3, 2023, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission stated that "Security forces have overreacted and needlessly beaten people, used tear gas, plastic and lethal bullets, and other excessive measures including on older persons and children resulting in at least one death."¹¹ Several videos circulated on social media showing the excessive use of force that the security personnel employed on the peaceful gatherings, including one showing a police member beating a person on horseback with his gun. The commission deemed these actions unnecessary and excessive and called for the implicated law enforcement officials to be subject to accountability.

3.2. Forced Evictions

In January 2023, the regional state of Oromia established Sheger City, comprising 12 sub-

¹⁰ Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 'የሰብአዊ መብቶች ጥሰቶች ሳይባባሱ አፋጣኝ መፍትሔ የማፈለግ ሥራ ሊጠናከር ይገባል' (February 10, 2023)

¹¹ EHRC press release, 'Regarding 2023 Adwa Victory Day celebration related incidents EHRC calls for implicated law enforcement officials to be subject to accountability' (March 3, 2023) <<https://ehrc.org/regarding-2023-adwa-victory-day-celebration-related-incidents-ehrc-calls-for-implicated-law-enforcement-officials-to-be-subject-to-accountability/>> accessed February 10, 2023

cities and 36 districts surrounding Addis Ababa.¹² Immediately after the establishment, the region began demolishing houses and evicting people, resulting in massive homelessness. The regional authorities have been accused of carrying out evictions illegally, without consultation with residents or providing alternative housing, as well as using violence, ethnically motivated moves and intimidation to evict people from their homes.¹³ 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 and defended that the actions are not ethnically motivated.¹⁴ According to the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission's report, the actions were taken without consultation, notice and adequate time, and sometimes residential homes were demolished while the majority of the residents were at work.¹⁵ The commission also stated that the demolishing was accompanied by detention, beating and intimidation of citizens by the regional securities. Regarding the demolition and forced eviction, the Commission stated, *"It is necessary to follow the legal process for the action of demolishing illegal construction and facilitate alternative solutions considering the social crisis that the action may cause."* Along with the commission, local human rights organizations have condemned the demolition and forced eviction, urging the government to follow the appropriate steps, respect the rule of law and the rights of citizens. HRDs from local human rights organizations have been detained arbitrarily for investigating the alleged violations of human rights. For example, in connection with the demolition and eviction four Ethiopian Human Rights Council investigators has been detained on January 05. 2023. A journalist called Samuel Assefa was also detained.

3.3. Armed Conflict and Unrest in Amhara Regional State

On April 06, 2023, the federal government announced to dissolve regional state special

¹² Ashenafi Endale, 'Newly formed Sheger City breaches human rights law: report' (The Reporter, April 1, 2023) <<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/32769/>> accessed April 29, 2023

¹³ EHRC press release, 'በአሮሚያ ክልል በሽግግር ከተማ እየተካሄደ ያለው ቤቶችን የማፍረስ እና በግዳጅ ማስነሳት እርምጃ የመኖሪያ ቤት አልባነትን አባብሷል' (March 31, 2023)

¹⁴ 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

¹⁵ EHRC press release, 'በአሮሚያ ክልል በሽግግር ከተማ እየተካሄደ ያለው ቤቶችን የማፍረስ እና በግዳጅ ማስነሳት እርምጃ የመኖሪያ ቤት አልባነትን አባብሷል' (March 31, 2023)

forces in Amhara as part of the decision to “build a strong centralized army that can protect the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” as claimed by the government.¹⁶ The government stated that these forces would instead join various security structures at the regional and federal level. However, this move received backlash from the regional security, people, elites and activists, who claimed that it would leave the people in the region in danger and without credible security protection as the region is recovering from war and facing many security threats. Also, these groups accused the government of planning to disarm the Amhara Special Forces. Lastly, these groups claimed that this move by the government was opposed because there was no credible debate and consensus among the public, opposing political parties and other concerned parties. In response to this, the government said the leaders of all the regions, and leaders of the Special Forces had agreed to begin the practical activities. Moreover, it was stated that this was reorganization, not a disarmament effort, and that Special Forces personnel from all regions could join the defense, federal police, or regional police forces as per their choices and needs.¹⁷

Nevertheless, violence escalated in different parts of the Amhara region, claiming the lives of many and causing a series of human rights violations, including mass detentions, and property destruction. The violence escalated into a clash between armed groups, members of the regional Special Forces, and the defense force. The situation results in a declaration of state of emergency in the region by August 4, 2023, the Council of Ministers on August 4, 2023.

Civilians and aid workers, including humanitarians from the Ethiopian Red Cross Society and Catholic Relief Service, were victims of the violence. According to a report by the UN, which was released at the end of August 2023, 183 civilians were killed, and over 1,000 mass arrests were carried out.¹⁸ The report also mentioned instances of drone strikes, house-to-

¹⁶ Addis Standard, Ethiopia begins “practical activities” to dissolve, reenlist controversial regional special forces, cautions actors not to impede move’ (April 7, 2023) <<https://addisstandard.com/analysis-ethiopia-begins-practical-activities-to-dissolve-reenlist-controversial-regional-special-forces-cautions-actors-not-to-imped-move/>> accessed April 10, 2023

¹⁷ Addis Standard, Ethiopia begins “practical activities” (n 16)

¹⁸ Ethiopia: Deteriorating human rights situation”, press release, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 29 August 2023; France 24, ‘At least 183 killed in clashes in Ethiopia’s Amhara’ (August 29, 2023) <<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230829-at-least-183-killed-in-clashes-in-ethiopia-s-amhara-un>> accessed November 13, 2023

house killings, and artillery attacks. Also on August 17, 2023, the African union called for an immediate ceasefire of the confrontations. In addition, in a press release, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission pleaded with the government to calm the situation, follow up on the human rights violations and ensure accountability for those violations.

3.3.1. State of Emergency in the Amhara Regional State

In August 2023, the Ethiopian government declared a state of emergency that had a nationwide application in case-by-case basis. The state of emergency was imposed in response to escalating tensions in the Amhara region, which eventually erupted into a full-blown armed conflict.

In Ethiopia, previous state of emergency measures was characterised by mass arrests, prolonged arbitrary detentions, extra judicial killings, politically motivated charges, and unlawful restrictions on movement and communication. Apart from ratifying the international human rights treaties, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution has laid the foundation for regulating the declaration of a state of emergency.¹⁹ As stated in Article 93 of the FDRE Constitution, a state of emergency suspends all rights guaranteed in the Constitution, except for a few specific rights. The rights that cannot be suspended according to the Constitution are Article 1 (the name of the state), 18 (the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment), article 25 (the right to equality), and Article 39 (1) and (2) (Article 1 of the Covenant) of the Constitution. Article 13(2) establishes the connection between the human rights outlined in the FDRE Constitution and international human rights, which stipulates that the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the constitution shall be interpreted in a manner conforming to the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights, and international instruments adopted by Ethiopia. Therefore, it is important to ensure that emergency measures are passed considering the non-derogable rights as they are stated in the FDRE Constitution in comparison to the progress made in the international arena that Ethiopia has agreed.

¹⁹ Brightman G., 'Assessment of the state of human rights during public emergency in Ethiopia: the state of emergency proclamation 5/2021 in focus' (May 2022) Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia 2

International human rights law specifies four requirements governing state of emergency.²⁰ These are the principles of legitimacy, necessity, legality, and proportionality. These principles play a crucial role in ensuring that state of emergency measures are implemented in a manner that upholds human rights and the rule of law. The principle of legality emphasizes that state of emergency measures must be carried out in accordance with existing laws and legal frameworks. It requires that the declaration of a state of emergency, as well as the subsequent measures taken, are based on explicit legal provisions that clearly define the scope, duration, and limitations of the emergency powers. The law must be clear and accessible to citizens. Ambiguous and general laws do not meet the principle of legality. The principle of legitimacy requires that the declaration of a state of emergency and the measures taken are grounded in a legitimate purpose recognized by international law. Legitimate purposes may include situations of armed conflict, natural disasters, public health emergencies, or other serious threats to the nation's security or public order.

The principle of necessity entails that state of emergency measures should only be imposed when no other alternatives are available to address the crisis effectively. It requires a careful assessment of the severity and urgency of the situation, as well as a demonstration that the measures chosen are the least restrictive means necessary to achieve the desired objectives. The final principle of proportionality demands that states of emergency measures are proportionate to the threat or harm they seek to address. This means that the measures should not exceed what is reasonably required to address the emergency situation. The government's response should be tailored to the specific circumstances and avoid unnecessary or excessive restrictions on human rights. In addition to the aforementioned conditions, states are obligated to guarantee the respect and protection of non-derogable rights even during a state of emergency. Non-derogable rights are those fundamental human rights that are considered inviolable and cannot be suspended, restricted, or limited under any circumstances, including during emergencies. Examples of non-derogable rights include the prohibition of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment and the prohibition of slavery.

When assessing the situation in Ethiopia in a state of emergency, it can easily be said that one of the fundamental challenges that international human rights law faces is the practice of

²⁰ The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) 6 December 1966 Article 4

systematic violation and abuse of human rights during public emergencies. The state practice of declaring a state of emergency in Ethiopia has become a usual business of the government particularly following the 2015 public protest.²¹ Since 2020, three states of emergencies were declared including the current state of emergency proclamation No. 6/2023 issued by Council of Ministries claimed “to protect public peace and security”. During public emergencies, grave and systematic human rights violations and abuses are common challenges as the states apply extraordinary powers to resolve threats to public order.²² The experiences of Ethiopia are no different in this regard, as states of emergencies have been accompanied by gross human rights violations. These violations are not unique to states of emergencies declared during times of conflict but also to the measures taken during pandemics, which have also been marked by gross human rights violations.

Despite the above requirements the current state of emergency proclamation No. 6/2023 goes against the requirements. In this regard, in a recommendation note from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) regarding Emergency Proclamation No. 6/2015, the commission noted that the proclamation fall sort of international standards and has overboard provisions.²³ Under Article 3 of the proclamation, it states that "the scope of application of the proclamation is within the Amhara Regional State or at the national level, or, if necessary, enforcement can be extended to any part of the country in response to any aggravating action or circumstance." This provision allows for a potentially broad application that lacks clearly identified criteria and has an undetermined scope. In its recommendation note to the parliament, EHRC highlighted that “declaring a state of emergency for the entire country and placing all law enforcement agencies under the command of the Emergency Department due to a security and safety threat originating from a single region has a significantly adverse impact on the regular administration of justice outside the state of emergency. It also raises concerns regarding the principles of legitimacy, necessity, and proportionality.”²⁴ The State of Emergency is declared throughout the country, despite the conflict being limited to

²¹ Brightman (n 19) 1

²² Evan J. Criddle and Evan Fox-Decent, ‘Human Rights, Emergencies, and the Rule of Law’ (2010) 34 (1) HUM. RTS. Q. Quarterly

²³ Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), ‘አስቸኳይ ጊዜ አዋጅ ቁጥር 6/2015 በተመለከተ ከኢትዮጵያ ሰብአዊ መብቶች ኮሚሽን (ኢሰመኮ) የተሰጠ ምክረ ሐሰብ’ August 2015

²⁴ EHRC (n 23) 13

Amhara region. The application of the State of Emergency Declaration in all parts of the country has no justification in fact or in law and constitutes unwarranted restriction of the exercise of civil liberties.

Furthermore, within the extensive array of powers and responsibilities conferred upon the Emergency Command Post, the phrase “necessary and appropriate powers” as stated in Article 4(4) is ambiguous and susceptible to misuse, potentially leading to actions beyond the scope of the law. Additionally, the proclamation grants the authority to “re-establish, organize, and reorganize various administrative levels and structures, and to make decisions and take other measures concerning administrative and security matters for the Emergency Command Post.” However, one of the non-derogable rights outlined in Article 93 of the constitution is the right to full self-government, which encompasses the establishment of governmental institutions within the respective territory and equitable representation in state and federal governments.

In relation to this, the commission highlighted that this provision allows for loose interpretation or inappropriate implementation, potentially enabling changes and decisions at the regional, district, and other administrative levels outside the constitutional framework. This carries the risk of exacerbating political tensions and conflicts and may run counter to the principles of strict necessity, proportionality, and legality.²⁵ Furthermore, Article 8 of the proclamation enforces a complete prohibition on substantive and procedural laws, including provisions of the criminal procedure code, which contradict the state of emergency decree as well as due process rights. This violation of the principles of strict necessity and proportionality results in the indefinite detention of individuals, including human rights defenders, within the command post. The commission placed significant emphasis on the fact that Article Nine of the state of emergency proclamation, which grants authority to military courts in cases where judicial bodies are unable to carry out their duties, is in direct violation of human rights law. Under Ethiopian law, military courts do not possess jurisdiction over civilians, even in times of war or war-related situations. In summary, the proclamation’s provisions are excessively broad and ambiguous, thereby contravening the principles of

²⁵ EHRC (n 23) 15

legality, legitimacy, necessity, and proportionality, which ultimately resulted in human rights violations. The Amhara region has been severely restricted since early April, including for humanitarian workers, exacerbating economic woes, mass arrests, extra judicial killings, and disrupting essential public and private services such as road, internet and network shutdowns.

The situation coupled with the declaration of SoE which grants extensive authority to federal officials to detain and limit individual rights intensify human rights abuses including detentions. Dozens of HRDs and dissents has been detained. The detainees include prominent figures such as an opposition Member of Parliament and chair of Parliament's Standing Committee for Public Expenditures & Administration Control Christian Tadele, who is an outspoken government detractor, and Yohannes Buayalew, a senior Amhara official who has criticized government policies. The parliament member is arrested without lifting his immunity granted under article 54 of the country's constitution.

Furthermore, civilians and aid workers, including humanitarians from the Ethiopian Red Cross Society and Catholic Relief Service, were victims of the violence. According to a report by the UN, which was released at the end of August 2023, 183 civilians were killed, and over 1,000 mass arrests were carried out.²⁶ The report also mentioned instances of drone strikes, house-to-house killings, and artillery attacks. Also on August 17, 2023, the African union called for an immediate ceasefire of the confrontations. In addition, in a press release, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission pleaded with the government to calm the situation, follow up on the human rights violations and ensure accountability for those violations. On October 30, 2023, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission issued a press statement concerning the prolonged armed conflict in the Amhara region, focusing on its adverse human rights implications.

“Within the context of the conflict, civilians suffered casualties and injuries due to heavy weapons attacks, including the use of drones. Furthermore, people were compelled to flee their homes, resulting in displacement, while their agricultural crops were destroyed, and their properties were subject to looting.

²⁶ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Ethiopia: Deteriorating human rights situation”, press release, (29 August 2023); France 24, ‘At least 183 killed in clashes in Ethiopia’s Amhara’ (August 29, 2023) <<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230829-at-least-183-killed-in-clashes-in-ethiopia-s-amhara-un>> accessed November 13, 2023

Additionally, there were cases of demolitions of homes, and the removal of roofs and doors from houses. These human rights abuses occurred alongside the suspension of internet and telephone services,” said the commission.

The state of emergency has exposed HRDs for more risk including arbitrary detentions, intimidation, attacks, and restriction of their right to movement and freedom of expression. EHRDC has documented instances of attacks and intimidation on HRDs since the conflict began in the region.

4. 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 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 common 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.²⁷ 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. Some incommunicado detentions were also signs of the human right situations in Ethiopia in 2023. These restrictions have been often excused by state of emergency measures though this measure doesn't allow unwarranted disregard of the rule of law.

²⁷ 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.

4.1. Arbitrary Arrest and Unlawful Detention: Pre-trial Detention

All human beings have the right to enjoy respect for their liberty and security. Article 9(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), article 6 of the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), as well as the fundamental principles enunciated in the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) under article 3 guarantees "the right to liberty and security of persons. Article 9(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides that:

"Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention. No one shall be deprived of his liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law."

This international instrument to which Ethiopia is a party requires deprivation of liberty not to be arbitrary, and to be carried out with respect for the rule of law.²⁸ As a regional instrument, Article 6 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights guarantees that:

"Every individual shall have the right to liberty and to the security of his person. No one may be deprived of his freedom except for reasons and conditions previously laid down by law. In particular, no one may be arbitrarily arrested or detained."

Similarly, the Ethiopian constitution under article 17 specifies that: *"No person may be subjected to arbitrary arrest, and no person may be detained without a charge or conviction against him."*

Arbitrary detention not only violates human rights but also undermines trust in institutions and the pursuit of justice that keeps societies safe and open. On the contrary, the practice in Ethiopia lacks adherence to these national and international laws. Yet, as evidenced by EHRDC's assessments, arrests and detentions against HRDs without due process of law and

²⁸ Human Rights Committee, General comment (GC) No. 35 Article 9 (Liberty and security of person) CCPR/C/GC/35 (16 December 2014) 3

without there being any effective legal remedies available to the victims concerned, are commonplace in Ethiopia. Due process of law is put aside the moment peace enforcement agents arrested people without warrant and kept them if they wish. It is also a violation of individual's right if an individual is arrested or detained on grounds which are not clearly established in domestic legislation.

In relation to this, the detention of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) investigators on January 5, 2023 was a typical example. On January 05, 2023, the Oromia police arrested EHRCO's three human rights experts and a driver along with the organization's vehicle. They were apprehended while investigating complaints of forced evictions in the Alem Bank area surrounding Addis Ababa.²⁹ The four human rights workers arrested were Bereket Daniel, Nahom Hussien, Daniel Tesfaye, and Bizuayehu Wendimu. The government had been accused of demolishing houses, and these human rights experts, as part of the EHRCO, were looking into allegations.³⁰ According to the organization and some of the expert's testimony, the human rights experts faced various threats and pressures by government security while in custody. The HRDs were brought to the nearby Oromia regional state court on the day of their arrest, and the court adjourned the case for the following day, January 06, 2023. The reason given by the police for their arrest was that the four EHRCO employees did not have a support letter from EHRCO, even though EHRCO was registered by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Civil Society Authority with a mandate to investigate human rights concerns and the experts presented IDs of the organization.

International and national CSOs, including EHRDC, called for the release of the HRDs after their arrest.³¹ For example, in a press release, EHRDC urged the government to immediately

²⁹ EHRCO press release, 'The Illegal Arrest and Pressure on EHRCO should be stopped!' (January 07, 2023) <<https://ehrc.org/2023/01/the-illegal-arrest-and-pressure-on-ehrc-should-be-stopped-2/>> accessed March 25, 2023

³⁰ EHRCO, 'Ethiopia must release human rights defenders detained in the country unconditionally-Urgent Joint Statement signed by 10 Horn of Africa Civil Societies Forum (HoACSF) members calling for the immediate release of the four EHRCO HRDs detained in Ethiopia' (January 12, 2023) <<https://ehrc.org/2023/01/ethiopia-must-release-human-rights-defenders-detained-in-the-country-unconditionally/>> accessed March 24, 2023

³¹ International Federation of Human Rights, 'Ethiopia: Arbitrary arrest and detention of four EHRCO members' (January 11, 2023) <<https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/ethiopia-arbitrary-arrest-and-detention-of-four-ehrc-members>> March 24, 2023

release the HRDs, put an end to the unlawful detention of human rights defenders in the country, and to stop violating the rights of journalists and HRDs. The center also demanded that those responsible for violating the rights of journalists and human rights defenders to be held accountable.³² On January 12, 2023, the HRDs were released on bail after eight days of detention.

Furthermore, instances of pre-trial detention have been a common practice in the year 2023. The Ethiopian media proclamation prohibits pre-trial detention for any alleged offence committed through the media.³³ The proclamation states that:

“Any person charged with committing an offence through the media by the public prosecutor shall be brought promptly before a court, without being remanded for further investigation pursuant to the Provisions of Criminal Procedure Code.”

Despite these legal stipulations and prohibitions, HRDs including journalists and dissidents in Ethiopia who express their opinions through media are often subject to arbitrary arrest, unlawful and pre-trial detention. The Human Rights Committee (HRC), in its General Comment No. 35, considers arrest or detention without a legal basis as arbitrary.³⁴ According to the HRC, “unlawful” detention includes detentions that violate domestic law and those that are incompatible with Article 9, paragraph 1, or any other relevant provision of the Covenant.³⁵ In addition to this, the HRC explained in its jurisprudence that “arbitrariness” should not to be equated with “against the law,” but must be interpreted more broadly to include elements of inappropriateness, injustice, lack of predictability and due process of law.”³⁶

³² EHRDC press release, ‘EHRDC is concerned about the Arbitrary Arrests of Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) Human Rights Experts’ <<https://ethdefenders.org/ehrdc-is-concerned-about-the-arbitrary-arrests-of-ethiopian-human-rights-council-ehrc-human-rights-experts/>> accessed March 25, 2023

³³ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021, Art. 86

³⁴ Human Rights Committee, General comment (GC) No. 35 Article 9 (Liberty and security of person) CCPR/C/GC/35 (16 December 2014) Para. 11

³⁵ HRC, GC No. 35 (n 34) Para. 44

³⁶ Communication No 305/1988: Netherlands. CCPR/C/39/D/305/1988 (Jurisprudence), Views Of The Human Rights Committee Under Article 5, Paragraph 4, Of The Optional Protocol To The International

As inferred from the media proclamation, offences committed through the media are not grounds for pre-trial detention. Nevertheless, based on EHRDC's assessments most of the journalists were being arrested from their home, place of work or café without being summoned first. This goes against the laws and undermines the principle of rule of law.

4.2. Censorship by Detention

In its broadest sense censorship refers to the act of suppressing, restricting, or controlling information, expression, or artistic works by anyone including government body. Censorship may include various forms including self-censorship and detention specifically for their expression. Detention has become a favored tool to censor those who speak out against abuses. HRDs play a vital role in promoting and protecting human rights, advocating for justice, and holding governments accountable. However, in Ethiopia, HRDs are being singled out because of their work and detention has become a tool to silence those who speak out against human rights violations. EHRDC monitors the situation of HRDs and found the following facts to showcase censorship by detention in the year 2023.

In 2023, more than 50 HRDs, including activists and journalists, were detained. Among these HRDs, Meskerem Abera, Genet Asmamaw, Gobeze Sisay, Ermias Mekuria, Dawit Begashaw, Henok Addissie, Bekal Alamirew, Belay Manaye, Belay Bekele and some others are still in detention as of this report writing.

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 riotas well as giving shooting exercises for informal groups.” **Genet Asmamaw** is another woman HRD who was

Covenant On Civil And Political Rights -Thirty-ninth Session concerning Communication No. 305/1988, August 15, 1990.

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”. Genet 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.”³⁷

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.³⁸ 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 was prohibited from going abroad to get medical treatment. The journalist brought this matter to the attention of the public. The journalist remains in detention, allegedly accused of terrorism charges as of January 2023.

Journalist **Dawit Begashaw**, who is an executive member of the Ethiopian Media Professionals Association and founder of “4 Kilo” Media, was also arrested by the Ethiopian National Defense Force on April 12, 2023, in Bahir Dar City, Amhara Regional State.³⁹ The

³⁷ 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

³⁸ Seid Mehammed (n 37)

³⁹ Ethio 251 Media,

journalist remains in detention as of this report. **Tewodros Asefaw**, a journalist and activist from “Ethio-Selam” YouTube based media channel were detained on June 10, 2023. On July 20, 2023, the prominent journalist and critique Tewodros Asfaw fled the country one month after his prison release. Moreover, **Alelign Mehretu**, a defense lawyer for many HRDs was arrested on April 7, 2023, and later released on bail on 25 April 2023. Lawyer Alelign 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 in October 2022 from his previous detention and later the court set him free after four months of trial. In his 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 this report 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.

Another concerning case is the case of poet and author HRD **Belay Bekele Weya** who was arrested on August 17, 2023. Belay, who has over 348K followers on Facebook is an HRD who condemns human rights violations and opposes war through poems. Amidst the ongoing state of emergency in the Amhara region he is detained as of the release of this report within Bahir Dar city, marking a four-month period since his initial arrest. Deutsche Welle, citing an interview with Belay’s lawyer, confirmed his continued detention.⁴⁰ Belay’s legal counsel has formally petitioned the court for his transfer to Addis Ababa, where both his family and lawyer reside. Belay was arrested many times, including the last year’s undisclosed detention period, followed by his release.

Besides, **Belay Manaye**, the chief editor of “*Ethio News*”, was arrested on November 13, 2023. Belay was apprehended near the Ethio News office, with no clear reasons provided for his arrest and no opportunity to challenge his detention. Belay’s journalistic work included extensive coverage of military conflicts in the Amhara region, a region where other journalists have also faced arrest amidst growing government crackdowns.⁴¹ The situation underscores the urgent need to address the challenges faced by journalists and safeguard their rights to report freely and without fear of reprisal.

Also, **Yidinekachew Kebede** the founder and editor of “*Negari TV*” were detained on August 17, 2023 and later released. In addition to the above, dozens of journalists were detained which include Tewodros Zerfu, Habtamu Minale, Yehuwlaashet Zerihun, Fikadu Mahtemework, Beyene Wolde and others. The lists of journalists are found in the annex part with the date of detention and release status.

The situation mirrors a similar pattern of challenges for HRDs, particularly for journalists.

⁴⁰ DW, ‘ገጣሚ በቀለ ወያ ፍርድ ቤት ሳይቀርብ 4 ወር ሞለው’ (6 ታኅሣሥ 2016) <<https://amp-dw.com/cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/amp.dw.com/am/%E1%8C%88%E1%8C%A3%E1%88%9A%E1%89%A0%E1%89%80%E1%88%88-%E1%8B%88%E1%8B%AB/a-67744902>> accessed December 27, 2023

⁴¹ Bnn, ‘CPJ Advocates for Detained Ethio News Editor, Raises Concerns Over Press Freedom in Ethiopia’ (December 5, 2023) <<https://bnnbreaking.com/politics/cpj-advocates-for-detained-ethio-news-editor-raises-concerns-over-press-freedom-in-ethiopia/>> December 18, 2023

The HRDs have been arrested in disregard of the law and with similar allegations of 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 become normal among authorities in Ethiopia.⁴² 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. 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 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.

In general, the detention of HRDs has become 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 year 2023 shows that the space for HRDs in Ethiopia has increased to shrink from time to time because of detention of HRDs. When HRDs including journalists are targeted and

⁴²Jacey 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

detained without due process, it undermines the principles of democracy and stifles the free flow of information.

4.3. Pattern of Arrest of Human Rights Defenders including Journalists and Dissent

In Ethiopia, journalists and dissenters who exercise their right to free speech frequently faced detentions. The detention took place in the context of widespread human rights violations. For instance, after falling to a record-low in 2019 and 2020 because of the 2018 reform, there have been an unprecedented number of increases in the wrongful detention and harassment of HRDs particularly journalists in 2023. Key causes for the increasing crackdown are the political unrest, forced evictions, ethnic attacks and armed conflict in the country. Reporting on politically sensitive issues, including actions of military, protests, religious tensions, and ethnic attacks are also used to justify detentions.

In this regard, a veteran journalist, **Temesgen Desalegn** case is a prime example. Temesgen who is the founder and managing director of the independent weekly Amharic “*Feteh*” (meaning “Justice”) magazine was released on November 16, 2022, after 5 months and 3 weeks of detention for allegedly publishing information about the defense force. Also, on February 13, 2023, Deacon **Yosef Ketema**, a journalist at the EOTC Afaan Oromo Broadcasting Service (EOTC TV), was detained by security forces at around 4:00 PM while he was on a work trip. Before his arrest, the journalist covered EOTC-related issues frequently and conducted interviews with religious figures on the incidents that affected the church. On the same day, the Ethiopian Federal Police arraigned 12 individuals who are members of the church along with seven leaders and members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Association of Youth and Adults to court for allegedly overthrowing the constitution by force and other crimes.

Furthermore, on February 14, 2023, **Tewodros Asfaw**, a journalist and government critique were arrested by security personnel at his residence in Addis Ababa. Tewodros had been extensively speaking out about the incidents related to the EOTC on his YouTube channel which has over 38,000 subscribers. Tewodros was also known for his sharp criticism against the government in his commentaries on political and social issues. In his last appearance on his YouTube channel, he discussed the call made by EOTC for a nationwide demonstration

titled “The Peaceful demonstration that determines the existence of the Synod”.⁴³ On February 16, 2023, Tewodros was granted bail by the Addis Ababa High Court for 30,000 Birr but he remained in custody while the police appealed the bail decision. After being held for eight days, Tewodros was released on February 22, 2023, when a higher court upheld the bail decision. Similarly, Yosef Ketema was released on February 21, 2023, after eight days of detention.

On March 2, 2023, **Beyene Wolde**, a journalist and the founder of Gurage Media Network, was arrested at the capital, Addis Ababa. On March 3, he was brought before the Lideta High Court in Addis Ababa, where he was allegedly accused of using violence to overthrow the country’s constitutional order, engaging in terrorism-related activities, organizing the youth, and using social media platforms to “cause mayhem and death.”⁴⁴ However, on March 7, 2023, his case was dropped by the Federal High Court and instead, on March 14, he was brought before the High Court in Gurage Zone, Butajira town. On April 12, 2023, Beyene was released on bail bond after spending 41 days in police custody. He claimed, in an interview posted on his YouTube channel, that he was not subjected to any ill treatment while in prison. After his release, the journalist posted to his Facebook page the following:

“My sole crime is being a journalist and what I am doing is helping people to be heard since the essence of journalism is being a voice for the voiceless.”

In the first half of April, 2023, a record number of journalists and media personalities were detained, indicating a crackdown on press freedom. More than six journalists were detained, including Meskerem Abera (Ethio Nikat), Dawit Begashaw (4 Kilo Media), Yeayeneabeba Gizaw (Yehabesha Wog) , Samuel Assefa (Ethiopian Media Service), Senayit Ayalew (Ashara Media), Genet Asmamaw (Yeneta Tube), Tewodros Asefaw (Ethio Selam), among others. Coupled with the state of emergency the already dire situation remains the same by the end of 2023 and dozens of HRDs are detained as of the release of this report. In addition

⁴³ Addis Standard, Security forces detain two journalists amidst crackdown following ongoing Orthodox Church schism, ensuing unrest” (February 15, 2023) <<https://addisstandard.com/news-security-forces-detain-two-journalists-amidst-crackdown-following-ongoing-orthodox-church-schism-ensuing-unrest/>> accessed March 25, 2023

⁴⁴ CPJ, ‘Ethiopian authorities detain Gurage Media Network founder Beyene Wolde’ (March 22, 2023)<<https://cpj.org/2023/03/ethiopian-authorities-detain-gurage-media-network-founder-beyene-wolde/>> accessed April 05, 2023

to the detentions, ill-treatment against HRDs has been recorded in 2023. In relation to this, CPJ reported that security personnel in Addis Ababa allegedly assaulted two while in custody between April 3 and April 13, 2023. **Genet Asimamaw** from “*Yeneta Tube*” and **Yeayeneabeba Gizaw** from “*Yehabesah Wog*,” which suspended operations in 2022, were beaten and harassed by security personnel during their detention. According to sources Yeayeneabeba was released unconditionally on April 5, 2023, and did not suffer any significant injuries. On March 14, 2023, **Niguessie Berhanu**, a critical voice and dissenter from “*Yegna TV*,” was abducted and tortured by unknown individuals. As inferred from his interviews, Niguessie was taken from Addis Ababa in a covered and unmarked vehicle to an unknown location, where he was beaten to the point of losing consciousness. He faced harassment, ill-treatment and death threats if he continued his journalistic work. He was later released and thrown by the roadside.

The 2023 published report by Reporters without Borders revealed in its Press Freedom Index a deteriorating state of press freedom in Ethiopia. In the 2022 edition, Ethiopia was positioned as the 114th country out of 180, while in the 2023 edition, it experienced a decline and was ranked 130th out of 180 countries.⁴⁵ The pattern of the arrests suggests that detention is being used as a form of censorship to suppress and intimidate dissent. Detaining HRDs serves as a strategic tool to stifle dissent, silence critical voices, and maintain a climate of fear and intimidation. In situations marred by human rights violations and heightened political tensions, HRDs often find themselves as the primary targets of detention as their effort to expose injustices and opposition to government policies often face resistance from governments. This systematic practice of targeting HRDs through arbitrary arrests and detentions aims to stifle their ability to speak truth to power, investigate critical issues, and inform the public. It is used to ease current political tensions to suppress dissenting voices, control the narrative, and maintain stability.

For instance, in 2020, in relation to the outbreak of the conflict in Northern Ethiopia several HRDs including journalist has been detained. In the beginning the government has been calling the conflict a “law enforcement operation” rather than a war. Thus, journalists and commentators expressing dissenting views, or doing independent reporting, became

⁴⁵ Reporters without Borders, ‘Ethiopia’ <<https://rsf.org/en/country/ethiopia>> accessed 25 July 2023

vulnerable to arrest, threats, expulsions, and other forms of attacks.⁴⁶ The fight to control the narrative of the conflict was one of the major reasons for the increasing hostility against HRDs. Similarly, dozens of HRDs including independent journalists are detained in relation to current armed conflict in the Amhara region. Some are detained without the protection of the law, and some are forced to flee the country due to the crackdown and some detained as many times. HRDs such as journalist Meaza Mohammed, Temesgen Desalegn, Bekalu Alamirew, Yayesew Shimelis, Gobeze Sisay, Tewodros Assefaw and activist Meskerem Abera have been detained more than three times since 2020.

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.

4.4. 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 in search of safety. Exile, while providing safety, takes away the passionate journalists' ability to report on their own communities, advocate for change, and holds those in power

⁴⁶ Muthoki Mumo, 'Journalists face growing hostility as Ethiopia's civil war persists' (CPJ, August 1, 2022) <<https://cpj.org/2022/08/journalists-face-growing-hostility-as-ethiopias-civil-war-persists/>> accessed 25 July 2023

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, Yayesew 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.⁴⁷

Journalist Tewodros Asfaw flees abroad 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 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.

On the other hand, Yayesew 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. Yayesew, 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

⁴⁷ Addis Zeybe, ‘Tamerat Negera went into exile again’ (November 24, 2020) <<https://addiszeybe.com/tamerat-negera-went-into-exile-again>> accessed August 18, 2023

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 journalists in exile also face diverse challenges. Firstly, they must navigate a new and foreign environment in which they often lack 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 from 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.

4.5. Self-censorship and Media Closure as a Result of Detention

As mentioned above during the period of 2023 in Ethiopia, a significant number of HRDs, particularly journalists, were subjected to arrests and detainment. Over 50 individuals were detained, and some remain in detention, others were released on bail after their court hearings. In certain cases, charges against individuals were dropped. These turbulent times,

marked by frequent detentions, have had a profound impact on the human rights landscape. Many HRDs, including journalists, have been compelled to abandon their professions due to the challenging environment. Some online YouTube-based channels have ceased their operations. This cessation can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the confiscation of media materials by security forces, the recurring detention of journalists, and the resulting self-censorship stemming from fears of further detentions, harassment, and physical attacks. The circumstances have created a climate of fear and uncertainty, leading to a shrinking space for freedom of expression and the press. The ability of journalists and other HRDs to carry out their vital work has been severely impeded, impacting the overall human rights situation in the country.

For instance, “*Gurage Media Network*” ceased to operate in September 2023. According to a journalist associated with the media outlet, the decision to cease operations was primarily influenced by the prevailing atmosphere and the state of press freedom.⁴⁸ The journalist stated that the challenging environment, characterized by restrictions on media activities and diminishing press freedom, made it untenable for the media organization to continue its operations. The climate of fear, recurring detentions of journalists, and the overall deterioration of the freedom of expression landscape collectively contributed to the difficult decision to cease functioning. Furthermore,

This case exemplifies the adverse impact of the restrictive environment on media outlets and highlights the significant challenges faced by journalists in Ethiopia.

4.6. Robbery on Media Houses

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.⁴⁹ 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

⁴⁸ Discussion with HRD 007B December 14, 2023

⁴⁹ Open book publisher, < <https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0014/chap06.html>> accessed August 25, 2023

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. 1238/2021.⁵⁰ 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 "*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

⁵⁰ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021

smartphone, from Ethiopian 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 the 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 Ethiopian 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.”⁵¹

This act of robbery is not the first-time incident on Ethiopian Media 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.

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.⁵²

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*

⁵¹ 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

⁵² Addis Ababa Grid, ‘Targeted Robberies’ Against Press Provoke Anger, Demands For Investigation’ <<https://addisababagrid.com/en/news/article/26256909/targeted-robberies-against-press-provoke-anger-demands-for-investigationer>> accessed August 25, 2023

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.

4.7. Media Crackdown and its Chilling Effect on Human Rights

The increasing repression of the media and individuals who express their views through the media has had a detrimental effect on human rights. This is because the crackdowns on media not only negatively affect press freedom, but also have a chilling effect on human rights. Detentions, warnings, and bans on media houses, including foreign media services, leave human rights violations uncovered. For instance, during the arrest of the *Gurage Media Network* founder, **Beyene Wolde**, the media was not functional, leaving the demonstrations and human rights violations uncovered in the area where the media operates.

Moreover, on January 28, 2023, the Somali regional state suspended 15 media outlets for allegedly operating without licenses. The suspension came after the Ethiopian Media Authority urged the Somali Region Communications Bureau to act against the media. The regional state’s communications bureau then issued a statement ordering the suspension of operations for 15 media outlets, including BBC Somali, MM TV, Universal TV, Horyaal TV, RTN TV, Universal TV, Five TV, Sahan TV, Horn Cable TV, and Goobjoog TV.⁵³ Also, the Ethiopian Media Authority on April 13, 2023, wrote a last warning letter to the Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT TV) allegedly accusing of disseminating unbalanced news without sufficient sources. In addition, the authority accused the media of violating journalistic ethics and the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No. 1185/2020.

The detention of many journalists, confiscation of their office equipment, bans on coverage,

⁵³ Addis Standard, ‘Somali region suspends 15 media outlets, accuses reporters of working without licenses’ (January 31, 2023) <<https://addisstandard.com/news-somali-region-suspends-15-media-outlets-accuses-reporters-of-working-without-licenses/>> accessed April 15, 2023

and warnings on the media, leave human rights violations unaddressed, unheard and uncovered.

4.8. 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.⁵⁴ This right is recognized under Article 30 of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution and includes the right to demonstration and petition.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶

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 cancellation 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 of May Day in Addis Ababa and its branch offices with a peaceful demonstration. We are forced to cancel the program scheduled to celebrate on May Day because the Addis Ababa Security Bureau has prohibited

⁵⁴ Human Rights Committee (HRC), General comment No. 37 (2020) on the right of peaceful assembly (article 21) Para. 1

⁵⁵ FDRE Constitution, Federal Negarit Gazeta, 1st Year No. 1, dated 21 August 1995.

⁵⁶ HRC, (n 54) Para. 8

*us. We ask you to convey this message to the Ethiopian employees through your media.*⁵⁷

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 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 CSO meetings have been impeded both directly and indirectly by the authorities in 2023. Indirectly, hotels engage in imposing a prohibition on 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 EHRDC encountered difficulties in obtaining permission from the sub-city and city administrations to reserve meeting halls for a training session for HRDs in Addis Ababa. EHRDC expressed its concerns and dissatisfaction in a letter addressed to the Bolesub-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.

4.9. Ban on Peaceful Demonstration

On February 9, 2023, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church called for a demonstration in response to the illegal appointment of bishops in January 2022, and the reports of killing

⁵⁷ CETU Letter, ‘የሰራተኞች ቀን (ሜይ 20) በዓል መሰረት ስለመግለፅ’ (22/08/2015E.C) <https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02GPZQxfwoPmRhi5rwFa6SDjpYfWMpiNsNehnJwZ5KwmWwyc1vcwXeWb7rMradmefl&id=100008632024841&mibextid=Nif5oz> accessed August 2, 2023

and mistreatment of believers by security forces in Oromia regional state. On the same day, the government released a statement warning against holding demonstrations and declaring the call for the demonstration illegal, as it did not have authorization. The government also linked the call for the demonstration to a plan to overthrow the government and stated that it crossed a “red line” which obliged the government to take law enforcement operations. The “law enforcement operation” scenario has been used to justify passing command posts (a de facto state of emergency) and detaining people in various situations, including the armed conflict in the north, the unrest in Amhara and Oromia regions, and in relation to the Church incidents. Despite the government’s stern statement and ban on demonstrations, the church announced that the peaceful demonstration would proceed as planned if the government did not respond to the demands of the church within two days. The church requested the government not to interfere in its internal affairs, to respect the legal rights of the church, to end the killing and detention of believers, and refrain from backing the illegally appointed bishops. After discussions between the government and the church, the demonstration was postponed.

Similarly, the Tigray interim government has banned more than three peaceful demonstration calls in the region. On 7 September 2023 hundreds of people have been detained in Tigray region and demonstrations were dispersed by the security forces. The demonstration was to highlight the continued suffering in Tigray following the end of a two-year civil war. Individuals who gathered at Romanat Square in Mekelle to join the rally were promptly arrested. Subsequent attempts to regroup and demonstrate were dispersed by security forces. One of the coordinators stated that “We arrived at the peaceful demonstration site in the morning, but a significant deployment of soldiers was in place, apprehending anyone who approached and sending them to prison.”⁵⁸ On September 7, 2023 security officers in Mekelle, the capital of Ethiopia’s northern Tigray Region, beat and arrested Teshager Tsigab, a reporter with the online news outlet “Yabele Media”, and Mehari Kahsay and Mehari Selemon, co-founders and reporters with “Ayam Media”, while they were covering an

⁵⁸ BBC news: as retrieved from the internet on October 2023, < <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/africa/2023-09-08-tigray-protesters-brutally-beaten-and-arrested/>>

opposition protest.⁵⁹ Mehari Kahsay and Mehari Selemon were released on bail on September 9, 2023.⁶⁰ Officials accused them of participating in an illegal protest but did not formally charge them in court. Authorities did not level any specific allegations against Teshager, or formally charge him in court before releasing him on bail on September 11, 2023. The brutal assault and imprisonment of three journalists in Tigray serve as a stark reminder of the authorities' intolerance for critical reporting.

The FDRE constitution and other subsidiary laws have recognized the right to peaceful demonstration. Article 30(1) of FDRE constitution provides that;

“Everyone has the right to assemble and to demonstrate together with others peaceably and unarmed, and to petition. Appropriate regulations may be made in the interest of public convenience relating to the location of open-air meetings and the route of movement of demonstrators or, for the protection of democratic rights, public morality and peace during such a meeting or demonstration.”

The Proclamation to Establish the Procedure for Peaceful, Demonstration and Public Political Meetings No. 3/1991 (Proclamation No. 3/1991) also protects the right to peaceful demonstration and outlines the specific notification requirement that must be fulfilled before carrying out such a demonstration.⁶¹ According to this proclamation, organizers of the demonstration must notify the authorities 48 hours before the demonstration, which aligns with the international standard. Article 9 of Proclamation No. 3/1991 specifies that peaceful demonstrations without prior notification are illegal. Nevertheless, the law does not require authorization from authorities, as claimed by the government when justifying the ban on the church's peaceful demonstration. Thus, the ban on peaceful demonstrations was a violation of the right guaranteed in the constitution and international instruments.

⁵⁹ CPJ, ‘Three Ethiopian journalists beaten and detained while covering protest in Tigray’ (September 21, 2023) <<https://cpj.org/2023/09/three-ethiopian-journalists-beaten-and-detained-while-covering-protest-in-tigray/>> accessed Sept. 29, 2023

⁶⁰ CPJ (n 59)

⁶¹ Proclamation to Establish the Procedure for Peaceful, Demonstration and Public Political Meetings, 1991, Art.4, Proc. No. 3, Neg. Gaz. Year 50, no.4. (hereinafter, Proclamation No. 3/1991); Yenatfanta Eskindir, ‘The right to peaceful demonstration in Ethiopia: its implementation and compatibility with international human rights instruments’ (Addis Ababa University) 2018

5. The Impact of the Armed Conflicts and Challenges Facing HRDs in Conflict Zones

5.1. Physical Insecurity

Defenders continued to face serious attacks on and threats to their physical and psychological integrity during the period covered by this report. At least one defender was violently attacked while documenting human rights violations, and numerous others were detained in connection with conflict situations in 2023. Physical insecurity remains a pressing concern as armed conflicts generate a volatile and hazardous environment, placing HRDs in constant jeopardy of violence and targeted attacks. This insecurity not only impacts their personal safety but also impedes their ability to operate freely and interact with communities in need. HRDs working in conflict areas in Ethiopia have been key in documenting abuses and human rights violations by different parties, yet they are subjected to risks and various forms of repressions including all the general insecurity linked to living in a place affected by conflict.⁶² Challenges in human rights work and investigations arise due to the limited capacity and resources available to HRDs in conflict zones. The destruction of infrastructure and displacement of populations make it difficult to gather evidence, document human rights abuses, and conduct thorough investigations. HRDs often face obstacles in accessing affected communities, obtaining testimonies, and preserving evidence, which undermines their ability to advocate for justice and accountability.

Most importantly, since conflicts commonly result in state of emergency measures, HRDs face increased risks to their personal safety and security. State of emergency measures place curfews, derogation of some human rights and gave wide power for authorities particularly for the executive organ. These challenges significantly hinder the effectiveness of human rights work and investigations in conflict zones. For instance, on November 17, 2023 EHRCO released a press statement on the deteriorating human rights situation in the Amhara region and stated that its staff was violently attacked while returning from field work. The human rights investigator was attacked by three unidentified assailants in Bahir Dar city. According to the statements the staff was beaten, robbed of his belongings, and the

⁶² Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network, '#Resilience4Peace: Human Rights Defenders Working in Conflict Areas' (June, 2021) <<https://africandefenders.org/resilience4peace/>> accessed December 26, 2023

perpetrators took away his organizational ID, and investigation works.⁶³ In relation to this, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders even if it is a non-binding document stipulated states obligation to protect HRDs. The declaration contains a series of principles and rights that are based on human rights standards enshrined in other legally binding international instruments, such as, the ICCPR the State's duty to protect all human rights includes the protection of the rights of HRDs.⁶⁴

5.2. Challenges in Human Rights Works and Investigations

After years of repression under the 2009 law on Charities and Societies, the adoption of Proclamation No. 1113/2019 brings a more democratic regulatory framework and reopens the space for CSOs and their engagement in human rights activities.⁶⁵ Nevertheless frequent challenges are facing HRDs working on human rights particularly those working in human rights education, women rights, monitoring and investigations. Human rights empower people to take action to demand and defend their rights and the rights of others.⁶⁶ To ensure this human rights education is crucial. A major action undertaken by HRDs is the provision of human rights education and training. However, CSOs have faced significant challenges to conduct human rights education. The challenges emanate from the state authorities and general political situation of the country. In some instances, it becomes difficult to implement projects due to armed conflicts and CSOs were forced to stop their project or change the area. Due to the conflict in the Amhara region, EHRDC become unable to implement human rights education trainings and were forced to change to other areas. In other cases, CSOs faced resistance from authorities. In this regard, **Befikadu Hailu** Executive Director of the Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy explained the human rights work challenges as follows:

⁶³ Ethiopian Human Rights Council Press Release November 17, 2023

⁶⁴ OHCHR, Commentary to the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (July 2011) 9

⁶⁵ FIDH, 'Ethiopia: a new era for human rights organisations?' (2019) <<https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/ethiopia-a-new-era-for-human-rights-organisations>> accessed December 2023

⁶⁶ Seilan Anbu, 'Human Rights Education : Educating One to Know Their Rights' (2012) Tamil Nadu Journal of Applied Management Research, 1(1)

“Due to the conflicts in various regions of the country and government interference, the human rights sector in Ethiopia has become increasingly alarming and restrictive. We have recently experienced intimidation from government security forces during our human rights training for ‘New Generation of Human Rights Defenders’ on December 2023. Some other challenges were also faced by different CSOs, like prohibition of prison and camp visitation and negative atmosphere for the civic space.”⁶⁷

On the other hand, human rights organizations with a mandate of monitoring and investigation faced restrictions in their work. The challenges of investigations include the unwillingness of government authorities to cooperate. On December 7, 2023, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (HRCO) released a statement that its efforts to investigate alleged human rights violations in Ethiopia have been severely impeded by obstruction from governmental authorities.⁶⁸ The Council stated that over the past two years, it has attempted to follow proper procedures and submit formal information requests and pleas for access to federal and regional governmental bodies where alleged abuses have occurred. However, the Council has faced silence, rejections, or outright refusal to accept letters of request from police, security, and detention authorities.⁶⁹

One major challenge is the lack of support and cooperation from government authorities such as regional states, prison administrations and police commissions. When the EHRCO requested access to police stations and prisons to verify information about detainees, they did not receive a positive response from the Addis Ababa Police Commission and the Federal Prisons Administration. This lack of access hinders their ability to gather accurate information and verify the status of detainees. This lack of cooperation often manifests as a refusal to provide information and relevant documents to investigators. According to EHRCO statements, there are instances where EHRCO requests get ignored by the Ministry of

⁶⁷ Interview with Befikadu Hailu Executive Director of Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy, December 2023

⁶⁸ Ethiopian Human Rights Council Press Release December 7, 2023
<<https://twitter.com/hrcoethio/status/1732834665742913558?t=yInD1AyBLMKzXLNzg7xJkg&s=19>>

⁶⁹ Addis Standard, ‘Gov’t obstruction hampers human rights investigations, says Rights Council’ (December 8, 2023) <<https://addisstandard.com/news-govt-obstruction-hampers-human-rights-investigations-says-ethiopian-human-rights-council/>> accessed December 25, 2023

Defence and Ministry of Peace seeking authorization to visit locations and meet witnesses to examine reports of violations in the Tigray region in 2021.

According to our interview with the EHRCO director **Dan Yirga**, he explained the civic space and human rights work as follows:

“As a sector, we are witnessing a deteriorating situation. We encounter a lack of cooperation from authorities in our investigations, with the prison administration and federal police leadership unwilling to grant us access for human rights investigations in prisons and police stations. Furthermore, we face challenges following the release of our investigation reports. Recently, the Addis Ababa Justice Office has charged us in relation to our No. 154 report concerning house demolitions. Additionally, our staff members have been attacked in conflict zones, and some have been detained due to their human rights work”⁷⁰

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights experts these obstacles hinder the efforts of human rights organizations in gathering accurate and comprehensive data, as well as impede their ability to hold accountable those responsible for human rights abuses.⁷¹

On the other hand, national human rights institutions also encounter challenges in their work of protecting and promoting human rights. These challenges include financial constraints and a lack of willingness to implement their recommendations, even when those recommendations are designed to improve the overall situation of the country. In an interview with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission expert the following was raised as challenges:

“There is less commitment to implementing the commission's recommendations. Additionally, the commission faces difficulties in accessing certain areas within the country due to armed conflicts and tensions in those specific regions.

⁷⁰ Interview with Dan Yirg Executive Director of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, December 2023

⁷¹ Ms. Navanethem Pillay, ‘Human Rights Investigations and their Methodology’ (24 February 2010) <<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-197324/>> accessed December 28, 2023.

Moreover, we have encountered challenges from regional authorities during election monitoring and human rights investigations. However, we were able to resolve these issues through dialogue and active interactions with the government. Our preferred approach for addressing these challenges is engaging in discussions with the relevant authorities. It is worth noting that there are no legal or internal institutional barriers hindering the commission's activities, as the commission proclamation has been amended.”⁷²

5.3. Internet Shutdown and its Impact on HRDs: Access to Information and Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democracy that encompasses other rights, including the right to seek, receive, and impart information using any medium. This fundamental freedom enables citizens to access knowledge and information, communicate with others, and express their opinions. In Ethiopia, around 16 million people, which represent 15.4% of the country’s total population, use the internet to exercise this freedom. Therefore, when the government shuts down the internet, it violates the citizens’ right to freedom of expression and communication.

Internet shutdowns⁷³ 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. 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. Despite their variations, the

⁷² Interview with EHRC M005 on November 8, 2023

⁷³ 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-keepit/>>

core truth remains constant: they infringe upon human rights.

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 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.⁷⁴

Since 2016, internet shutdowns have occurred over twenty times in Ethiopia during major events, including the armed conflict in northern Ethiopia, and the insurgency in Wollega. Despite this, the government of Ethiopia has launched a national “Digital Strategy” (2020-2025) aimed at achieving digital transformation by the year 2025. However, prior to the announcement of the national “Digital Strategy”, the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, made a controversial statement in parliament addressing the issue of recurrent internet shutdowns in Ethiopia. In his statement, PM Abiy Ahmed said:

“As long as it is deemed necessary to save lives and prevent property damage, the internet would be closed permanently, let alone for a week. Ethiopia will cut the internet as it’s neither water nor air.”

While the early years of Abiy’s administration provided a favorable climate for online space, the government has since 2018 implemented numerous internet shutdowns. In this regard, social media platforms have been banned for over five months in 2023. The decision came after the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church protests, and activists calling for peaceful

⁷⁴ ‘Freedom of Opinion and Expression and Sustainable Development -Why Voice Matters’ <<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/expression/cfis/sustainabledevelopment/submit-sustainable-development-freedom-of-expression-csos-maat-for-peace-41.pdf>> accessed August 11, 2023

demonstrations in online spaces. Sparked by tensions between the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the government, authorities began blocking access to social media platforms, including Telegram, Facebook, and *TikTok* on February 9, 2022. However, the government did not make any official announcement about the ban nor reveal the purpose and the individuals responsible for restricting access to these social media platforms.

In the first week of April 2023, 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*.⁷⁵

An HRD from the Amhara region in an interview explained the situation as follows:

*“There is a significant challenge in accessing information due to internet shutdowns. These shutdowns prevent us from accessing online information. In particular, the network cut off during drone attacks has worsened the situation, making it impossible for us to verify the human rights violations resulting from those attacks. For instance, the network has been offline for three days following the drone attacks that occurred in Dega Damot in September 2023. Curfews, security situations, and restrictions imposed by the command post have posed difficulties in accessing information offline and conducting human rights monitoring.”*⁷⁶

On December 20, 2023, a trusted local news media outlet with over 1 million followers reported a complaint regarding the interruption of internet services for 32 CSOs in Gondar City, Amhara Region.⁷⁷ The report, citing representatives from the CSOs and authorities from the city administration, stated the following:

32 CSOs operate in the city in the effort to answer the development questions of the society that are not covered by the government. These CSOs are managing 1

⁷⁵ 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

⁷⁶ Interview with HRD 006 MB December 29, 2023

⁷⁷ Tikvah Ethiopia, ‘The civil society organizations in Gondar stated that their work was disrupted due to the interruption of the internet’ (December 20, 2023) <<https://t.me/tikvahethiopia>> accessed December 25, 2023

point 2 billion birr in the city. It becomes difficult to spend budget for the intended purpose at the time and to get additional support from large organizations due to the interruption of the internet. 90 percent of the civil society's work is done based on the Internet. The internet disruption has created a negative impact on CSOs regular work, and the internet should be released to allow large organizations to trust in the work we do and continue to support. It is difficult for CSOs to carry out their work without internet. I was forced to travel to Addis Ababa (the capital) to connect and continue the projects. The internet service that is currently released for hotels should also be allowed for CSOs.

The ban has been a continuation of an internet shutdown made effective from February 9, 2023 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, 2023.⁷⁸ However, it was reinstated for a brief time during the national entrance exams for 12th graders. 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.

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

⁷⁸ 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

from the Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD Ethiopia), an organization advocating for the removal of these limitations. Also on September 2023, EHRDC joined the global civil society coalition #KeepItOn Coalition in condemning internet shutdowns in different parts of Ethiopia particularly in the Amhara region following the total shutdown of internet in the region on August 2023.⁷⁹

The repercussions of internet 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 and access to information.

6. Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)

Women around the world have played a crucial role in advancing human rights.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ Despite this, WHRDs play an important role in different aspects of life,⁸² 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

⁷⁹ Access Now, 'Preserving freedom in crisis: Ethiopia's internet shutdowns must not become the norm' (September 2023) <<https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/open-statement-internet-shutdown-amhara/>> accessed on December 26, 2023

⁸⁰ 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

⁸¹ 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

⁸² Mahlet Abreham, 'defending her voice: a quest on Women Human Rights Defenders in Ethiopia' (2022) XIII Ethiopian Human Rights Law Series 182

various ways. Among the crucial roles played by WHRDs in Ethiopia are policy advocacy, training, providing shelter for victims, and advocating for accountability to seek justice for prevalent gender-based violence crimes. They also advocate for the inclusion of gender-responsive measures and the elimination of discriminatory practices including laws and directives. WHRDs also work towards holding perpetrators accountable for their actions, advocating for justice for victims of GBV. 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 due to their activism are common. 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.

In the year 2023 period, WHRDs have been detained due to their human rights work and journalistic activities. Among those detained were **Meskerem Abera**, an activist and HRD who owns an online media outlet, journalist *Genet Asimamaw*, and *Yeayinabiba Gizaw*, who used YouTube to discuss various topics including accountability for human rights violations. Their arrests came amid political unrest in Amhara state, where protesters opposed government plans to dissolve the regional Special Forces.⁸³ In addition to being detained, Genet and Yeaynabeba have also experienced physical abuse and gender-based harassment during their detention.

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. According to an interview with him he stated that 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

⁸³ CPJ, "At least 8 journalists detained amid renewed unrest in Ethiopia" (April 14, 2023) <<https://cpj.org/2023/04/at-least-8-journalists-detained-amid-renewed-unrest-in-ethiopia/>> accessed April 20, 2023

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. Online threats and intimidation tactics are aimed at instilling fear, discouraging their activism, and preventing them from raising awareness about the issue.

The other prominent WHRD is **Atikilt Janka** who 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 CSO 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 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. This was a threat and an attempt to intimidate her from pursuing justice for the girl and women who are victim of right violation.

Additionally, on December 1, 2023 a group of 10 rights and advocacy organizations, including EHRDC, the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) and the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA), have released a statement condemning a directive drafted by Ministry of Education.⁸⁴ The draft directive which was issued on September 2023 restricts maternity leave for primary and secondary female students to 15 days after giving birth before they are suspended from their academic program.⁸⁵ The organizations argue that this limit violates women's constitutional rights to education and equality. In relation to this, women's rights activists who planned to hold discussions on the

⁸⁴ Addis Standard, 'Rights groups criticize draft directive limiting maternity leave for female students' (December 1, 2023) <<https://addisstandard.com/news-rights-groups-criticize-draft-directive-limiting-maternity-leave-for-female-students/>> accessed December 15, 2023

⁸⁵ ትምህርት ሚኒስቴር, 'የአጠቃላይ ትምህርት የተማሪዎች ምዘና እና የክፍል ክፍል ዝውውር መመሪያ (ረቂቅ) (መስከረም 2016) አንቀጽ 15 (5); Ministry of Education Draft Directive Article 15 (5)

directive at hotels were indirectly prohibited from organizing their event and were asked to obtain permission in advance before conducting any meeting. An HRD explained the situation as follows:

*“On November 2023, we had planned to hold a discussion meeting on the Ministry of Education directive at hotels. We were left only one day to hold the meeting. However, on that day, they asked us to obtain permission from the city to proceed with the meeting. As a result, we had to postpone the meeting, and we have not held it yet.”*⁸⁶

On the other hand, feminist activists faced smear campaigns accused of being “bad wives” or “bad mothers”, “widows” or advocates of hidden agendas. They also faced intimidation, death threats and insult on social media platforms. 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.⁸⁷ 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.

7. Human Rights Defenders with Disability

In 2023 in Addis Ababa, construction projects resulted in the demolition of houses and stores including dwellings and trading establishments. This initiative was believed to be part of the city’s rebuilding plan, which had been delayed for a considerable period due to public opposition and outcry.⁸⁸ 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 were 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

⁸⁶ Interview with HRD 008R January 10, 2023

⁸⁷ Phone Interview with Ababayehu Geta August 13, 2023

⁸⁸ The Reporter, ‘Demolition sweeping Addis’ <<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/32197/>> accessed March 18, 2023

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 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.⁸⁹ According to the compliant 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.

8. 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

⁸⁹ Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 'በአዲስ አበባ ከተማ የንግድ ቤቶችን ከማፍረስ ሂደት ጋር በተያያዘ አካል ጉዳተኞች ለኢሰመኮ ያቀረቡትን አቤቱታ በተመለከተ' (May 23, 2023)

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.⁹⁰ 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.

8.1. 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 fulfill 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.⁹¹

⁹⁰ ‘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.

⁹¹ UNOHCHR, ‘Human Rights, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism’

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.⁹² 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.

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.⁹³ Similarly, Article 7, which deals with “conspiracy to carry out terrorist acts,”

<<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/Factsheet32EN.pdf>> accessed August 11, 2023

⁹² 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

⁹³ 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

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. Considering these concerns, amendments to the articles of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation is essential to comply with the international law principle that demands legal clarity.⁹⁴ The practical problems arising from the law and practice are discussed below.

8.2. 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.⁹⁵ Despite the decline of terrorist acts in recent years, the expanded frameworks remain intact and are used by regimes outside of anti-terror contexts. Since Ethiopia’s anti-

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.

⁹⁴ Kokkinakis v Greece (1993) 17 EHRR 397, 44–46

⁹⁵ Rebecca and George, ‘The new terrorists: the normalization and spread of anti-terror laws in Australia’ (2014) 363

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.⁹⁶

Arresting HRDs and journalists under the Anti-Terror 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. Despite the amendments to the draconian law, 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. Concerning this, on 2023 more than 50 HRDs have been detained in Ethiopia and some of the HRDs have been allegedly charged with terrorism offenses under the new terrorism proclamation. HRDs among others, Meskerem Abera, Gobeze Sisay, Genet Asimamaw, Dawit Begashaw and lawyer Alelign 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 critical issues leading to self-censorship to avoid legal repercussions and heavy charges. This can 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

⁹⁶ 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

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 threat to freedom of expression in Ethiopia. By equating journalism with terrorism, authorities justify repressive measures against journalists. This not only undermines the fundamental 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.

9. The State of Freedom and Ethiopia's 2023 Status

For the past five years, since 2018, Ethiopia has experienced both progress and challenges in the state of press and civic freedom. Following reforms, there were initiatives to allow the civic space to operate freely and to ensure a pluralistic media by amending repressive laws and establishing independent institutions. However, affected by frequent wars, violence, and restrictions, Ethiopia backtracked in both civic space and press freedom in 2023. According to a report by the "CIVICUS Monitor," Ethiopia is listed among countries where the Civic Space is not closed but repressed. The report stated that journalists continue to face restrictions in the context of conflict because of their war-related reporting and face arrest, which remains a tactic commonly used by the authorities to silence and intimidate them.⁹⁷ Additionally, "Reporters Without Borders" ranked Ethiopia 130th in its 2023 Freedom Index. Ethiopia was ranked 114th in 2022. The report stated that most of the recent press freedom gains have been lost since Ethiopia became embroiled in ethnic conflicts and a civil war.⁹⁸ The "Freedom House" 2023 report also rated Ethiopia as 'Not Free,' giving it 21 out of 100 marks in its annual study of political rights and civil liberties worldwide.⁹⁹ Although the space is not entirely closed, there are significant restrictions and limitations on civil society organizations, activists, and journalists. This repression undermines the principles of

⁹⁷ CIVICUS Monitor, 'People Power Under Attack 2023, CIVICUS Monitor' (December 2023) <<https://civicusmonitor.contentfiles.net/media/documents/GlobalFindings2023.pdf>> accessed December 29, 2023

⁹⁸ Reporters without Borders, (2023) <<https://rsf.org/en/index>> accessed December 27, 2023

⁹⁹ Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World in 2023' <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/ethiopia>> accessed December 30, 2023

democracy and hampers the free flow of information and ideas, which are crucial for a vibrant and informed society. The decline in Ethiopia's press and civic freedom suggests that the gains made through earlier reforms have been eroded due to the impact of conflicts and volatile political environments.

10. Conclusion

This report represents a comprehensive compilation of four periodic assessments conducted throughout the year 2023, shedding light about HRDs in Ethiopia. It assesses the challenges and opportunities faced by HRDs, highlighting the persistent difficulties they encounter, such as arbitrary arrests, unlawful detention, threats, and attacks. The report emphasizes the urgent need for the Ethiopian government to prioritize the protection of HRDs and uphold the fundamental freedoms enshrined in the constitution and international declarations. The volatile political environment and ongoing armed conflicts have further heightened the risks faced by HRDs, hindering their crucial work of documenting human rights violations, advocating for victims, and promoting peace and human rights. The report underscores the significance of international cooperation in safeguarding the rights of HRDs.

Furthermore, the report draws attention to the impact of state of emergency measures, revealing how such measures have restricted the rights of HRDs and exposed them to potential abuses by authorities. It examines the state of freedoms in Ethiopia, pointing out a regression in various forms of freedom, including press freedom and civic space. The report also provides a comprehensive overview of the increasing number of detained HRDs since 2020. In light of these findings, the report offers a range of recommendations to address the challenges faced by HRDs and improve the human rights landscape in Ethiopia. It serves as a valuable resource, providing insights into the progress made and the obstacles encountered by HRDs in the country.

Overall, this report serves as a vital tool for understanding the situation of HRDs in Ethiopia, highlighting the urgent need for concerted efforts to protect their rights and create an enabling environment for their essential work in promoting human rights.

Annex I

The List of Human Rights Defenders Detained Since 2020 - 2023

In 2023, there were dozens of detained HRDs across the country. Data indicates that at least 15 HRDs are currently in detention as of the release of this 2023 report in January 2024. Some of the HRDs, including journalists, were being held in camps where their due process rights and legal protections are disregarded. Additionally, due to the crackdown, repeated detentions, and threats by the government, at least 6 HRDs have been forced to flee the country in 2023. The space for HRDs in Ethiopia has increased to shrink from time to time because of detention of HRDs and the following are some of the instances documented since 2020 showing some of the data.

A. List of human right defenders detained in 2020

No.	Name	Sex	Position	Date of arrest	Release Status
1.	Yayesew Shimelis	M	Journalist	March 27, 2020	April 23, 2020 (1 st arrest)/Exiled
2.	Temesgen Desalegn	M	Author and Journalist	October 14, 2020	Released 15 Oct. 2020 (1 st arrest)
3.	Misgan Zinabe	M	Journalist	October 14, 2020	Released 15 Oct. 2020
4.	Dasu Dula	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
5.	Bahillu Nacho	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
6.	Soraa Jirmaa	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
7.	Sabboontuu Ahmed	F	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
8.	Getachew Alemayehu	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
9.	Habtaamu Abera	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
10.	Baayisaa Turaa	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
11.	Binyam Yonas	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
12.	Sinboo Dajanee	F	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
13.	Belay Manaye	M	Activist & Journalist	July 05, 2020	August 20, 2020 released after 46 days
14.	Misganaw	M	Media	July 05,	August 20,

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	Kefelegn		Personnel	2020	2020 released after 46 days
15.	Nathaniel Gech	M	Journalist	September 1, 2020	Released Sept. 4, 2020 (1 st arrest)
16.	Getiye Yalew	M	Journalist	October 1, 2020	Released on Oct. 5, 2020
17.	Wako Nole	M	Journalist	October 14, 2020	Released after a day
18.	Bikila Amenu	M	Journalist	October 14, 2020	Released after a day
19.	Ibsa Gadisa	M	Journalist	October 14, 2020	Released after a day
20.	Ermias Mulugeta	M	Journalist	October 26, 2020	Released after 9 hours
21.	Yassin Juma	M	Kenyan Journalist	July 2,2020	Released after 49 days
22.	Medhanie Ekubamichael	M	Journalist	November 07, 2020	Released On December 9, 2020 after 32 days
23.	Bekalu Alamirew	M	Journalist	November 04, 2020	Released on Nov. 20, 2020 (1 st arrest)
24.	Yonatan Mulugeta	M	Journalist	August 05, 2020	August 20, 2020 released after 46 days
25.	Nathaniel Gech	M	Journalist	October 6, 2020	Released October 18, 2020 (2 nd arrest)
26.	Elizabeth Kebede	F	Activist Lawyer	April 4, 2020	May 6, 2020

B. Lists of human right defenders detained in 2021.

No.	Name	Sex	Position	Date of arrest	Status
1.	Abebe Bayu	M	Journalist	Arrested b/n June 30-July 02, 2021	Released 18 August 2021/Exiled
2.	Yayesew Shimelis	M	Journalist	”	Released 18 August 2021(2 nd arrest)/Exiled
3.	Fanuel Kinfu	M	Journalist	”	Released 18 August 2021
4.	Bekalu Alamirew	M	Journalist	”	Released 18 August 2021(2 nd arrest)
5.	Fana Negash	F	Journalist	”	Released 9 August 2021
6.	Miherete Geberkirestos	F	Journalist	”	Released 9 August 2021
7.	Mussie Hadra	M	Journalist	”	Released on 9 August 2021
8.	Nebeyu Mikael	M	Journalist	”	Released 9 August 2021
9.	Melkamfire Yemam	F	Journalist	”	Released 9 August 2021
10.	Fikerte Yensu	F	Journalist	”	Released 9 August 2021
11.	Tewlde Taddesse	M	Lawyer of Awlo Media	”	Released 9 August 2021
12.	Kibrom Worku	M	Journalist	October 22, 2021	26 January 2022
13.	Tamirat Negera	M	Journalist	December 10, 2021	Released on 6 April 2022/ Exiled On 21 November

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					2022
14.	Meaza Mohammed	F	Journalist	December 10, 2021	Released on January 18, 2022 (1 st arrest)
15.	Eyasped Tesfaye	M	Activist	December 8, 2021	Released on 19 January 2022
16.	Tesfa-Alem Tekle	M	Journalist	October 31, 2021	Released on 15 January 2022
17.	Ermias Alemu	M	Journalist	October 2021	Released
18.	Abdusalaam Hasan	M	Journalist	November 21, 2021	Released
19.	Mikiyas Tilaun	M	Journalist	September 2021	Released on 17 March 2022
20.	Tesfalem Woldyes	M	Journalist	October 2, 2021	Released on October 5, 2021
21.	Amir Aman	M	Journalist	December 15, 2021	Released on 1 April 2022
22.	Addisu Muluneh	M	Journalist	December 15, 2021	Released on 18 January 2022
23.	Thomas Engida	M	AP Camera Man	December 15, 2021	Released on 1 April 2022
24.	Abay Zewdu	M	Journalist and Humanitarian	July 17, 2021	Released on 29 July 2021 (1 st arrest)
25.	Girmay Gebru	M	Journalist	February 30, 2021	March 3, 2021
26.	Tamirat Yemane	M	Journalist	February 30, 2021	March 3, 2021
27.	Alula Akalu	M	Journalist	February 30, 2021	March 3, 2021
28.	Fistum	M	Journalist	February	March 3,

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	Berhane			30, 2021	2021
29.	Desu Dulla	M	Journalist	November 18, 2021	Released

C. Lists of human right defenders detained in 2022

No.	Name	Sex	Position	Date of arrest	Status
1.	Awkee Ali Ibrahim	M	Journalist	Feb. 6, 2022	Released before 14 Feb. 2022
2.	Najib Tayib	M	Journalist	Feb. 6, 2022	Released before 14 Feb. 2022
3.	Muhyddin Mohammed	M	Journalist	Feb. 6, 2022	Released before 14 Feb. 2022
4.	Gobeze Sisay	M	Journalist	April 01, 2022	Released on 11 Nov. 2022 (1 st arrest)
5.	Gobeze Sisay	M	Journalist	Abducted on May 01, 2022	Abducted for 9 days & released on May 9, 2022 (2 nd arrest)
6.	Temesgen Desalegn	M	Journalist	May 26, 2022	Released on November 16, 2022 (2 nd arrest)
7.	Meaza Mohammed	F	Journalist and Humanitarian	May 28, 2022	Released on June 20, 2022 (2 nd arrest)
8.	Meskerem Abera	F	Journalist	May 21, 2022	June 15, 2022
9.	Gashaye	M	Journalist	May 19,	Released on

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	Negusse			2022	18 July 2022
10.	Getenet Yalew	M	Journalist	May 19, 2022	Released on 18, 2022
11.	Habtamu Melese	M	Journalist	May 19, 2022	Released on 18 July 2022
12.	Daniel Mesfin	M	Media personnel	May 19, 2022	Released on 18 July 2022
13.	Kelemu Gelagay	M	Media personnel	May 19, 2022	Released on 18 July 2022
14.	Yayesew Shimelis	M	Journalist	May 26, 2022	Released on 20 June 2022 (3 rd arrest)
15.	Gebremariam Tizazu	M	Journalist	May 19, 2022	Released on July 2022
16.	Meaza Mohammed	F	Journalist	Sept. 7, 2022	Released on Oct. 13, 2022 (3 rd arrest)
17.	Gobeze Sisay	M	Journalist	Sept. 7, 2022	November 11, 2022 (3 rd arrest)
18.	Solomon Shumye	M	Journalist	May 20, 2022	Released on June 17, 2022 (1 st arrest)
19.	Asaye Derbie	M	Activist	Sept. 11, 2022	Released on Oct. 13, 2022 (1 st arrest)
20.	Meskerem Abera	F	Activist	23 May 2022	Released on 15 June 2022 (1 st arrest)
21.	Belay Bekele Weya	M	Poet and Activist	June 28, 2022	Released on July 4, 2022 (1 st arrest)
22.	Yayesew Shimelis	M	Journalist	June 28, 2022	Released on July 9, 2022 (4 th

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					arrest)/exiled
23.	Bekalu Alamirew	M	Journalist	May 27, 2022	Released on 28 June 2022 (3 rd arrest)
24.	Tihitina Belay	F	Activist	May 19, 2022	Released on 18 June 2022
25.	Abay Zewdu	M	Journalist and Humanitarian	10 Sept. 2022	Released on 13 Oct. 2022 (2 nd arrest)
26.	Asaye Derbie	M	Human Rights Activist	7 Sept. 2022	Released on 13 Oct. 2022 (2 nd arrest)
27.	Sabontu Ahmed	F	Journalist	26 May 2022	30 May 2022
28.	Solomon Shumye	M	Journalist	17 Dec. 2022	Released after 5 hours on 17 Dec. 2022 (2 nd arrest)
29.	Meskerem Abera	F	Activist	December 13, 2022	Released on 5 January 2023 (2 nd arrest)
30.	Gobeze Sisay	M	Journalist	Sept. 7, 2022	Released on 11 Nov. 2022 (4 th arrest)
31.	Addisu Getaneh	M	Lawyer and Human Rights Advocate	May 23, 2022	Released on 18 June 2022
32.	Hailemicheal Gessesse	M	Journalist	May 2022	Released on 19 March 2023
33.	Misgna Syoum	M	Journalist	May 2022	Released on 11 Jan. 2023
34.	Teshome Temalew	M	Journalist	May 2022	Released on 11 Jan. 2023

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35.	Haben Halefom	M	Journalist	May 2022	Released on Dec. 2022
36.	Dawit Mekonnen	M	Journalist	May 2022	Released on 19 March 2023

D. Lists of human right defenders detained in 2023

N o.	Name	S e x	Position	Date of arrest	Status
1.	Abay Zewdu	M	Journalist and Humanitarian	April 6, 2023. Detained three times before	Released on April 25, 2023 (3 rd arrest)
2.	Meskerem Abera	F	Rights Activist and analyst	April 9, 2023. Third arrest since 2022.	Detained (3 rd arrest)
3.	Genet Asmamaw	F	journalist	April 6, 2023	Detained
4.	Assefa Adane	M	Negere Wolkait Media Editor	April 6, 2023	Detained
5.	Senayit Ayalew	F	Journalist	April 13, 2023	Released on April 27, 2023
6.	Elias Debas	M	Journalist	April 13, 2023	Released on April 27, 2023
7.	Tewodros Asfaw	M	Political Analyst and Journalist	April 13, 2023	Released on June 10, 2023 (2 nd time)/exiled
8.	Gobeze Sisay	M	Journalist and Activist	May 6, 2023 Third time arrest	Detained (5 th arrest)
9.	Ermias Mekuria	M	Activist and	May 12, 2023	Abducted

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			Humanitarian		and detained
10.	Dawit Begashaw	M	Arat Killo YouTube channel, Founder, Ethiopian Media Professionals Association Executive Member, Journalist	April 12, 2023	Detained
11.	Aleligne Mihretu	M	Defense lawyer for detained HRDs	April 7, 2023	Released on bail 25 April 2023
12.	Samuel Assefa	M	Journalist	April 4, 2023	Released on April 13, 2023
13.	Sisay Awgichew	M	CSO leader	April 2023	Detained
14.	Yosef Ketema (Deacon)	M	EOTC TV - reporter	February 13, 2023	Released on 21 Feb. 2023
15.	Aragaw Sisay	M	Journalist	March 26, 2023	Released on April 25, 2023
16.	Beyene Wolde	M	Journalist	March 2, 2023	Released on April 12, 2023
17.	Getnet Ashagri	M	Journalist	March 26, 2023	Released on bail April 25, 2023
18.	Daniel Tesfaye	M	EHRCO Human Rights Expert	January 5, 2023	Released on bail January 12, 2023
19.	Bezuayehu Wondimu	M	EHRCO Human	January 5, 2023	Released on bail

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			Rights Expert		January 12, 2023
20.	Bereket Daniel	M	EHRCO Human Rights Expert	January 5, 2023	Released on bail January 12, 2023
21.	Nigussie Berhanu	M	Media analyst	Abducted on March 14, 2023	Released after being ill-treated for 4 days (1 st arrest)
22.	Yeayineabeba Gizaw	F	“Yehabesha Weg” magazine Managing Director	Abducted on April 2023	Released unconditionally on April 5, 2023 after being ill treated
23.	Asaye Derbie	M	Activist	June 05, 2023	Released on 18 July 2023 (3 rd arrest)
24.	Melat Dawit	F	Artist	May 23, 2023	June 3, 2023
25.	Tesfaye Hailemariam	M	Writer and Social Media Influencer	April 25, 2023	April 26, 2023
26.	Temesgen Desalegn	M	Journalist	Detained on May 20, 2023 & June 27, 2023	Released on May 21, 2023 & June 27, 2023 Respectively (3 rd and 4 th arrest)
27.	Azariya Solomon	M	EHRCO Human Rights Expert	March 27, 2023	March 28, 2023
28.	Henok Adissie	M	Teacher and activist	April 2, 2023	Detained
29.	Genet Ayalew	F	EHRCO Human Rights Expert	March 27, 2023	March 28, 2023

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30.	Daniel Tesfaye	M	EHRCO Human Rights Expert	March 27, 2023	March 28, 2023
31.	Bekalu Alamirew	M	Journalist (arrested for the 4 th times)	August 6, 2023	Detained (4 th arrest)
32.	Abay Zewdu	M	Journalist and Humanitarian	August 10, 2023	Detained (4 th arrest)
33.	Tewodros Asfaw	M	Journalist	February 14, 2023	February 22, 2023 (2 nd arrest)/exiled
34.	Yidinekachew Kebede	M	Activist Lawyer, Social Media Influencer and Journalist	August 17, 2023	September 1, 2023
35.	Belay Bekele	M	Poet HRD	August 17, 2023	Detained (3 rd arrest)
36.	Fekadu Mahitemework	M	Journalist	August 25, 2023	September 4, 2023
37.	Ashebir Tsegaye	M	Journalist	August 26, 2023	Detained
38.	Nigussie Berhanu	M	Political analyst and host	August 30, 2023	Released
39.	Tewodros Zerfu	M	Journalist	August 26, 2023	Detained
40.	Yehualashet Zerihun	M	Journalist	September 11, 2023	October 27, 2023
41.	Firew Tekle	M	Journalist	September 25, 2023	October 2, 2023
42.	Lij Bini (Social Media name)	M	Activist	September 26, 2023	October 26, 2023 (3 rd arrest)
43.	Teshager Tsigab	M	Journalist	September 7, 2023	September 11, 2023
44.	Mehari Kabsay	M	Journalist	September 7, 2023	September 9, 2023

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45.	Mehari Solomon	M	Journalist	September 7, 2023	September 9, 2023
46.	Elias Debas	M	Journalist	September 18, 2023	Detained
47.	Meseret Tamiru	F	Media Personnel	February 14, 2023	Released on February 28, 2023
48.	Amanuel Asifaw	M	Media Personnel	February 14, 2023	Released on February 28, 2023
49.	Belay Manaye	M	Journalist	November 13, 2023	Detained
50.	Habtamu Minale	M	Journalist	December 7, 2023	December 13, 2023

ETHIOPIAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERDS CENTER



✉ EHRDCenter@ethdefenders.org

☎ +251958888348

📍 **Bole, Friendship Business Center 5th floor**



+251988810877
(PROTECTION DEPARTMENT)