

EDITORIAL: *Addis Neger*

By Tecola W. Hagos

December 9, 2009



Nothing infuriates me more than the mistreatment of mothers and children. I could easily go into epileptic convulsion when I hear about harm done to the most valuable and yet the most vulnerable members of society. The next groups of people that I believe deserve all the protections we can muster are reporters, editors, and publishers, people who inform, educate, and galvanize us. Without free press and open communication, a nation and a people have no life and no future. Of all the fundamental freedoms, the right to free speech and expression is the most foundational and cannot be delaminated from the right to life.

I am disturbed and extremely agitated by the treatment of *Addis Neger* by Meles Zenawi and his Government. The leadership of that newspaper/magazine has been run out of town by Meles Zenawi and his functionaries. Meles Zenawi and his Government have a long and brutal history of oppression and suppression of the private media in Ethiopia for over seventeen years. [See Appendix I, II and III] The Editors of *Addis Neger*, of this highly responsible newspaper/magazine, are now seeking refuge elsewhere in the World leaving their flagship enterprise because of threat and possible prosecution under the Anti-Terror Proclamation No. 652/2009, promulgated on 28 August 2009. It is a great tragedy that Ethiopian journalists have been victimized by Meles Zenawi and his out of control enforcers for so long. Here are some heartbreaking statement extracts from recent victims, editors of *Addis Neger*:

“This is the culmination of months of persecution, harassment and black propaganda by the Ethiopian government on *Addis Neger*,” Teklemariam said in the 4 December statement. *Addis Neger*, one of Ethiopia’s few independent newspapers, was opened in September 2007 with two editorial goals - “The Idea of Public Reason” and “Integrity and Independence” – the statement said.

“The reason we left the country is basically because we found out that the government is preparing charges to take us to court. According to our reliable sources within the government and the international community in Addis Ababa, the government is cooking a number of charges against us both individually and as a company,” Negash told IPI by email. “Actually this is just the culmination of the smear campaign opened before four years on our newspaper and its founders and journalists. The government daily, *Addis Zemen* and the party affiliated website- aigaforum.com has been publishing more than ten articles targeted on *Addis Neger*.” Negash added that the editors and journalists could face 10 to 20 years in prison if convicted, and that the court could seize the newspaper’s assets.

[IPI “IPI Regrets Tragic Loss of One of Ethiopia’s Leading Independent Newspapers Six Months before May 2010 General Elections.” See Appendix I]

The record of the last seventeen years since the coming into force of a draconian Press Proclamation (as amended) is dismal. It is a record of brutal suppression of free expression in the guise of regulating the media in accordance with some constitutional mandate. Over two hundred journalists and publishers have fled Ethiopia seeking refuge in other nations during the period of seventeen years of Meles Zenawi’s leadership. The proper use of principles of free speech and expression would have allowed for the development of a vigorous and responsible private media. But the current leaders of Ethiopia have used their iron fist to obliterate any form of independent thinking and expression thereof by civic minded Ethiopian journalists and their publishers. Many have left the country and several more are languishing in prison under draconian sentences.

The recent proclamation of Anti-Terrorism Proclamation No. 652/2009 is used as a tool to frighten journalists and their publishers from reporting or commenting on the misdeeds of the Government and its leaders, for any statement criticizing Meles Zeanawi and his Government can be interpreted by Meles’s kangaroo courts to constitute an advocacy of terrorism. But those with courage and a sense of duty to their community and who persist in exposing the Government and its leaders pay the high price of being detained under horrible conditions, then sentenced for long years of incarcerations, or pay heavy fines that may not commiserate with the economic condition of the nation.

For a number of Ethiopians, *Addis Neger* brought fresh analysis and undoctored information on conditions in Ethiopia. Ethiopians from all walks of life did find common interest in the many enlightening and informative articles and essays in *Addis Neger*. Dissenters had a chance to be heard by writing articles and commentaries on our Ethiopian economic, social, and political conditions and having it published in *Addis Neger*, whereas now they would have no chance to have their views heard or read by the Ethiopian public. Meles Zenawi and his functionaries have effectively silenced the voices of dissenters and concerned Ethiopians from expressing their views and having it published. This is one very harmful and diabolical scheme of Meles Zenawi to silence dissenters and political opposition groups and parties. In particular Meles is targeting Medrek by destroying the one outlet Medrek members had a fair say by getting published in *Addis Neger* so that the Ethiopian people would be properly informed. This is another insidious blow to the opposition and Members of Medrek

I never had the privilege of meeting the Editors of *Addis Neger* now on the run for their lives from the brutal iron fist of Meles Zenawi and his enforcers except Abiye Teklemariam the Executive Editor. I met Abiye in Washington DC for the first time about half a year ago when we both were attending a presentation that was organized by a think-tank group featuring two distinguished professors: Messay Kebede and Seid Hassen. I wrote my report on the Conference and posted it in my Website. A few days later, I received an e-mail from Abiye pointing out a couple of ideas I had misunderstood in the presentation given by Messay Kebede. Because I was impressed with his thought process and with the measured polite tone of his rebuke, I arranged a meeting with Abiye.

Thus, I had the good fortune of spending about three hours with Abiye discussing Ethiopia's political and economic future and the role *Addis Neger* might play in that process. I also learned that he was on his way to Oxford University to work on his PhD on the subject of the role of media in national development.

I was impressed not only with Abiye's obvious intellect, but even more so with his wisdom and hope for Ethiopia. As I discussed with Abiye my concern about the future of Ethiopia, I realized that I was actually talking about "him" and his generation of Ethiopia's future leaders. That was when I even entertained in my mind that Ethiopia after all is not going to be a sinking ship, for it has such intelligent and patriotic children like Abiye. I went home that day after my meeting with Abiye reassured, hopeful, and greatly appreciative of Ethiopia's young men and women who would be leading us out of our nightmarish existence under two of the most vicious regimes in the last thirty years of our long Ethiopian history.

Meles Zenawi and his close supporters not only they are destroying our present lives and the life of our beloved country, but also murdering our future by destroying our young future leaders. How else can we explain the incarceration of Ethiopia's young star Leader Judge Birtukan Mideksa, or the closing of *Addis Neger* there by disbanding our future young exceptionally bright and responsible leaders to seek refuge elsewhere in the World? Meles Zenawi is a vicious selfish man, just look around him you will not find a single individual he has groomed even from his own party as a visible leader to succeed him. He seems bent on leaving Ethiopia rudderless to drift to its destruction in an ocean of humongous waves of troubles of divisive ethnic conflicts, Kilil system of alienation, territorial disintegration, and treasonous conspiracy against the very Sovereignty of Ethiopia. Shame on you Meles Zenawi and all of you sycophantic supporters of such destructive Leadership. God Bless Ethiopia's courageous Journalists, Editors, and Publishers. God Bless *Addis Neger*. God Bless Ethiopia.

Tecola W. Hagos
December 9, 2009
Washington DC

Appendix I

Independent Newspaper Addis Neger Closes and its Editors Flee Ethiopia, Fearing Persecution

IPI Regrets Tragic Loss of One of Ethiopia's Leading Independent Newspapers Six Months before May 2010 General Elections

Monday, 07 December 2009

Naomi Hunt, Press Freedom Adviser for Africa & the Middle East

Three editors of independent Amharic-language weekly *Addis Neger* have fled Ethiopia, saying that the government intends to prosecute them under Anti-Terrorism Proclamation No. 652/2009, promulgated on 28 August 2009. The last edition of the newspaper, which has been closed down, appeared on Saturday, 28 November.

On Friday, Managing Editor Mesfin Negash, Executive Editor Abiye Teklemariam and Editor-in-chief Tamerat Negera issued a statement with a Washington, D.C. dateline saying that the decision to close the paper and leave the country was made to protect the owners and journalists.

“This is the culmination of months of persecution, harassment and black propaganda by the Ethiopian government on *Addis Neger*,” Teklemariam said in the 4 December statement.

Addis Neger, one of Ethiopia’s few independent newspapers, was opened in September 2007 with two editorial goals - “The Idea of Public Reason” and “Integrity and Independence” – the statement said.

“The reason we left the country is basically because we found out that the government is preparing charges to take us to court. According to our reliable sources within the government and the international community in Addis Ababa, the government is cooking a number of charges against us both individually and as a company,” Negash told IPI by email. “Actually this is just the culmination of the smear campaign opened before four years on our newspaper and its founders and journalists. The government daily, *Addis Zemen* and the party affiliated website- aigaforum.com has been publishing more than ten articles targeted on *Addis Neger*.”

Negash added that the editors and journalists could face 10 to 20 years in prison if convicted, and that the court could seize the newspaper’s assets.

IPI Director David Dudge said: “I am extremely concerned to hear that staff members at *Addis Neger* have been forced to leave the country and seek asylum. The flight of the journalists at this time reinforces concerns over the government’s desire to silence critical journalism ahead of next year’s parliamentary elections and it is hard not to see a link between these two events. The newspaper was developing a solid reputation for independent reporting and it is a tragedy for the Ethiopian public that the journalists felt compelled to undertake this ultimate act of self-protection.”

In further evidence of the Ethiopian government’s apparent desire to tighten control over the media in the run-up to the election, publishers Serkalem Fasil and Eskinder Nega, who were jailed for 17 months after a 2005 media crackdown, continue to be denied publishing licenses. They were released from prison in 2007 after being given a presidential pardon, which is now being challenged by the government.

The pardon allowed not just the journalists’ release from prison, but also overturned fines levied against the publishers’ four media houses. Earlier this year the government took

the media houses to court to try to enforce payment of the fines but failed. The government is now appealing the ruling in the Supreme Court, Nega told IPI in an email.

Thirteen political publications shut during the 2005 media crackdown remain closed.

Following a 16-21 November press freedom mission to Ethiopia, IPI recommended that the Government must refrain from attempts to control the information flow and recognize that a plurality of voices, including those that dissent from the government's view, are helpful to Ethiopian society.

Appendix II

ETHIOPIAN FREE PRESS JOURNALISTS' ASSOCIATION IN EXILE

May 4th, 2009 | EthioPolitics.com |

Press Release

We, members of Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA) in exile all over the world, observe today, 3 May 2009, in sadness.

We are increasingly disturbed and despaired by the persistent authoritarian and brutal behavior of the government of Meles Zenawi, which succeeded in effectively putting all services and resources of the state bureaucracy under its monopolistic hold to suppress and finally silence the independent press, the only form of outlet for the people of Ethiopia.

One of the most glaring instances of the intensity of the persecutions of the free-press is manifested in the large number of journalists who fled the country in exile to save their lives. Over 101 journalists are in exile, 11 are still facing serious plights in Kenya, Uganda, Yemen, Japan and India.

Most journalists have left after the brutal 2005 crackdown on the press. In October 2005 the government closed down all independent publications in the country as a deadly vengeance to its defeat in the elections. Since then most of those publications have not been allowed to resume. Journalists Serkalem Fasil, Eskindir Nega and Sisay Agena are still denied press license.

Editors of weeklies: Awramba Times, Harambe, Enku and Addis Neger suffering under frequent harassments under the new punitive press Law, which has become the tool of silencing any criticisms against the ruling party. And several papers are compelled to close down due to persistent harassments and deliberate sky-rocketing of printing prices.

We appeal to the international community, donor countries and Human rights groups to put pressure on the government of Meles Zenawi to lift the ban on the free press and reverse the dreadful policies which the regime is implementing against Independent Journalists. We also urge the international community not to ignore the plights of exiled journalists in Kenya, Uganda, Yemen and India, who are facing serious problem.

We take this opportunity to thank the numerous international Media & Human Rights Organizations that have been maintaining a steady solidarity with EFJA, and have played a crucial role in publicizing the tribulations of Ethiopian Journalists.

ETHIOPIAN FREE PRESS JOURNALISTS' ASSOCIATION

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Appendix III

Fleeing Ethiopia's turmoil

By Kefale Mammo Posted Jul 1 2001

Home / **Recent Stories** / Fleeing Ethiopia's turmoil

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's lethal policies have brought havoc upon the free press in Ethiopia. Since 1993, the Zenawi regime's policies have resulted in the closure of more than 250 titles of the free press. They have subjected 25 journalists and publishers to excessive fines. Another 27 journalists have jail sentences ranging from three months to 36 months, and 43 have fled the country.

The regime has been retaliating against independent journalists and publishers harshly, particularly since 1993. In the course of the regime's rule (or misrule), the elaborate stipulations of press law were created to perpetuate pre- and post-publication censorship and to stop press freedom from taking root in Ethiopia and advancing the democratization process. The government uses the bureaucracy, police force, security agencies, the judiciary and the economic machinery of the state to hunt and destroy independent journalists and publishers who work for peace and democracy in the one-party, one-ethnic dictatorship.

Led by the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA), founded in March of 1993, independent journalists are putting up fierce resistance and debunking the hidden agendas and motives of the regime. The free press is also doing its utmost to enlighten international institutions, diplomats and the press corps in Addis Ababa by divulging the violent human rights abuses, undemocratic practices and unlawful activities of the state.

Dozens of independent journalists and publishers are regularly charged in politically motivated, flimsy indictments of disturbing the peace, inflaming public opinion, fomenting dissension and endangering public safety and security. The courts sentence journalists to politically prescribed long-term jail time and heavy fines ranging from 5,000 to 20,000 birr (US\$600-2,400).

Along with the frequent harassment, intimidation, police interrogations and threats of torture, other attacks have been made against the media. The private tabloid Tobia's office was burned down. EFJA's office was robbed of its internationally donated computers and fax-machines, and armed agents of the state forced news vendors in the town of Shoa Robit, North-Shoa, to burn copies of the monthly A'imiro. The regime has not absolved itself from the alleged crime of arson and larceny by bringing the criminals to justice.

The state's monopoly over the press includes ownership and management of most of the media and all of the large printing firms that are capable of producing the tabloids and the broad-sheet newspapers of the country. It uses the state-owned press to mark up the cost of producing newspapers, making the sales prices of private tabloids more expensive and out of reach for the majority of the reading public. Moreover, rising costs of printing will wipe out the meager profit margins that may accrue to the poorer publishers.

Independent journalists continue to work despite all of the obstructions thrown at them by the government. About eight percent of independent journalists live year-round in prisons in Ethiopia.

According to EFJA's current chairperson, Kifle Mulat, at least 16 independent journalists have lost their lives by direct attacks from state agents, by suicide or by causes intimately related to their profession.

Gizachew Mengistu, of the weekly Moked, was shot dead in broad daylight in the provincial town of Debre Berhan. Tesfaye Tadesse, founder, publisher and editor of the monthly, Mestawet, and the weekly, Lubar, was hacked down on his doorstep in Addis Ababa. Worku Mekonnen of the weekly Maebel committed suicide in his home in Addis Ababa a year ago after enduring long police investigations. Abay Hailu of the newspapers Wolafen and Agere died in prison after 24 months without any court decision. Two more journalists, Kumsa Burayu of Wolafen, and Bekele Mekonnen Rabo of Urji, disappeared years ago and are still unaccounted for.

One of the most glaring instances of the intensity of the government-driven persecutions of the free-press journalists is the large number of those who have fled the country in exile to save their lives. The exodus of the 43 journalists manifests the ever-increasing intensity of the ordeals faced by the press in Ethiopia. Although hindered by their exile, these journalists are working from abroad and throwing their human resources together to continue their work toward freedom of expression.

EFJA has enjoyed the support and firm solidarity from the international media and human rights organizations. The Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists has been taking the lead in publicizing the reports and statements of EFJA among millions of its members around the globe. It is helping to motivate international media and human rights organizations to protest against the arrests, fines and alleged killings of EFJA members by the regime.

The dispatching of a number of international fact-finding missions to Ethiopia have helped other professional bodies, such as the Reporters Sans Frontiers of Paris and the Committee to Protect Journalists of New York, to gauge appropriately the degree of hostility and cruelty of Meles Zenawi against press freedom.

EFJA struggles to break asunder the inveterate marriage of convenience between the state and the media in Ethiopia and to make the media serve, without any restraint, the public, which pays the taxes for its sustenance.

It is time for the international community to make the crucial choice, which is to effectively support Ethiopian free-press journalists and their professional organization, EFJA, attain their noble end: enabling press freedom to take root in Ethiopian Society.

Ethiopian Journalists in Exile

Kibret Mekonnen, 30, Kinfu Assefa, 30 and Kefale Mammo, 63 are living in exile in Amsterdam. Together, they are on the international committee of the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA). The other 40 journalists are scattered all over the world and are too far apart to keep effective communication with each other.

Kefale Mammo is a veteran journalist of Ethiopia with experience in print, electronics media and news agency fields. He was the editor in chief of *Ruh*, the successful private monthly in Ethiopia.

His journalistic profession and his responsibility as the first chairperson of EFJA set him against the Meles regime, and he was detained, fined and threatened with death.

Currently he is the chief coordinator and commentator of ETHIO TV.

Kefale, in addition, is writing for various publications, including *Ra'eey*, an Amharic quarterly journal of political and general themes published in Frankfurt, Germany. Kefale is chairing International Committee of EFJA, in which Kibret and Kinfu also hold executive positions. He has resided in Amsterdam since March 1997.

Kibret Mekonnen is getting his master's degree in audiovisual media, documentary film directing and camera work. He was one of the founding editors of the monthly and weekly *A'imiro*. Kibret left Ethiopia due to imminent danger to his life and has been living in Amsterdam since January 1995. He founded The Foundation of Ethiopian Information and Documentation in the Netherlands and is chief film director, cameraman and editor of ETHIO TV, an offspring of the Foundation.

Kinfu Assefa has just completed a training course in computer science. He was one of the owning founders and the chief editor of the weekly Mogad until he left Ethiopia in January 1995. Kinfu is currently employed as a full time computer programmer in Amsterdam. He is devoting his spare time to gathering news from the Internet and other sources for ETHIO TV. He is also one of the chief newscasters of ETHIO TV.

The trio in Amsterdam runs EFJA's international committee. Their principal objectives are to keep track of the journalists in the diaspora, to release a list of them once a year and to help journalists at home in the struggle to rid Ethiopia of her twin archenemies, despotism and thought control.

They are co-producing and broadcasting a weekly hour-long television program for ETHIO TV, which consists chiefly of news, commentaries, interviews, cultural music, entertainment and documentaries. It is geared toward satisfying the needs of the Ethiopian community in the Netherlands. The program focuses on Ethiopia, Ethiopian affairs and related information.

The group hopes to broadcast countrywide, but cannot find the financial means. They solicit subsidies from various social institutions to run the program, and they also receive assistance from professional, humanitarian and donor organizations.

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