

# 33<sup>rd</sup> Special Report

## Repeated Violation of the Freedom of Expression

### Introduction

As much as man has been endowed with the ability to think, the right to freely express the product of his thought is a natural and inalienable right. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) believes that the stifling of the free expression of thought is harmful more to society in general than to the individual human being whose right to that freedom has been violated. As a result, EHRCO has repeatedly condemned the illegal actions of government officials with respect to the freedom of thought and expression. In providing its advice repeatedly, EHRCO had hoped that those bodies that suppress the freedom of thought and expression would realise that their illegal actions violate the natural and fundamental rights of citizens and would, consequently, refrain from such actions. The recent violations of this right of elders in North Omo, students and residents of Ambo, students and teachers in East Wellega attest to the fact that citizens' freedom of thought and expression in the country is under a serious threat. In its 27th special report issued on December 13, 1999 and titled '*Human Rights Violations in North Omo*', in its 31st special report issued on April 20, 2000 entitled '*Human Rights Violations in Ambo*', as well as others, EHRCO had shown that using various pretexts, government officials and armed security officers have taken different illegal actions against citizens and especially students and teachers who had tried to express their thoughts peacefully. Unfortunately, as noted in its report about human rights violations in North Omo, the situation has been getting worse probably either because the government was unable to understand the seriousness of the problem or because it was unwilling to give it appropriate attention. To date, the violation of the human rights of Ambo students has not stopped. Twenty-one students are still in detention. Even after EHRCO's special report was issued, the three students - **Chala Abdeta**, **Meseret Diriba** and **Endale Gemechu** - have been taken from their earlier places of detention to unknown places.

In violation of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states,

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.

**And in transgression of Article 29 (2) of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia that states,**

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression without any interference. This right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any media of his choice.

Many people have been killed, detained, dismissed from their work, and subjected to serious difficulties of survival. Many have been forced to leave the country because of

their fear of similar government actions against them.

## Human Rights Violations in Nekemte

That these serious illegal actions are continuing without any sign of concern on the part of the government is sufficiently indicated by the human rights violations going on in Nekemte and other towns in Wellega beginning from March. Two students have been shot and wounded; two teachers, three students and one civil servant have been brutally beaten; forty-four students, four teachers and other workers of Nekemte high school have been detained; and two students have been severely beaten while in detention. The details of all of these violations are as follows:

- On 22 March 2000, students of Nekemte Comprehensive High School requested the school director to be allowed to "help save the forest by extinguishing the forest fire". On March 23, 2000, the school director presented the students' request to the East Wellega Schools Administration. On the same day, officials of the schools administration met with representatives of the students whom they informed that their demand was beyond their authority, but that they would present the students' request to the East Wellega regional administration. Moreover, they promised the students to inform them of the authorities' reply.
- Since the students did not receive any reply in accordance with what had been promised them earlier, they reminded the school director of their request. The director presented the students' request to the responsible authorities for the second time. He came back to the students and informed them that he has arranged for a meeting between them and officials of the regional administration for 3 April 2000. Officials of the regional administration failed to show up on 3 April. Angered by this, the students gathered within the school compound and started shouting and carrying written slogans such as "Let us save the burning forest! Once the fire is extinguished, let us also plant new trees in place of the burnt ones! Why are we surrounded by soldiers for simply requesting to be allowed to help extinguish the forest fire?"
- On 6 April, the deputy chairman of the zonal administration went to the school and asked the school director for the names of the students and teachers believed to be responsible for writing and posting the slogans. The director replied that he could not tell which of the three thousand students was responsible, that he believed that the requests of the students were shared by all of them and that none of the teachers participated. On 10 April, officials of the East Wellega schools administration went to the school and held a meeting with three student representatives drawn from each class (i.e., a total of 56 students). At that meeting the students presented the following demands:

You say that the Ambo students that were killed died as a result of the stones being thrown. Are you now protecting us from such stones by surrounding us with armed security officers?

Why are not all students present at this meeting? Why are staff members of the school's administration not present?

Why are we being surrounded by armed security when we are simply

demanding the respect of our rights?

It is said that Oromiya does not have sufficient trained manpower. On the other hand, those students who score 2.8 in the Ethiopian School Leaving Examinations are being deprived of the opportunity to pursue their higher education and are made to join the growing number of unemployed people. Many workers are being dismissed from their work. Why does this happen?

You tell us that democratic rights are being respected, but at the same time people in Oromiya are being illegally detained and maltreated. Why does this happen?

Unfortunately, officials were unable to give satisfactory answers to these and other questions raised by the students. Consequently,

- In the morning of April 13, the students of Nekemte secondary school gathered in the school compound and started whistling and shouting. On hearing the shouting, the deputy administrator of East Wellega Zone went to the school and ordered the school director saying, "All teachers should go into their classes and continue teaching. If the students refuse to learn, they should leave the school compound". The school director communicated the order to the teachers.
- In accordance with this order, a few of the teachers went to their classes and tried to teach those students that were willing to attend. The rest of the students left the school compound. When the shouting got stronger and louder, those students that had entered their classes left and joined the shouting students. At this, the special police that had been surrounding the school as well as the town's police entered the school compound, closed the school gates, and ordered the students in the compound not to go out. The police then fired their guns into the air and started chasing those students that were shouting and whistling.
- The students then started throwing stones at the police. The police beat a large number of students. In attempting to escape the police beatings, many students run to the school gate and, defying the order given him by the police, the school guard opened the gate and let the students escape. The police continued beating those students who had stayed hidden in classrooms, eventually chasing them out of the school compound.
- On that day and after, two students were wounded and seven others were beaten severely (see Table 1 below)

Table 1. Students, teachers and others whose rights were violated beginning from April 13, 2000

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	<b>Victim's name and description of circumstances</b>
1	<b>Wounding by Gunshot</b> <b>Student Teklu Mulatu-</b> 17 years old and a grade 10 student - He was one of the students who had left the school compound for fear of police beatings, While walking along the main road in town, he was shot and wounded on the right chest by a special police officer. The police took him by car to Nekemte hospital where he was treated for 5 days. He has continued receiving medical treatment as the bullet was still lodged in his body when he was



2	<p>respectively. On hearing that the police were looking for them, Ato Tesfay and Tesfa went to Nekemte police station at 2 o'clock on April 17. Both were detained. At 6 o'clock in the afternoon, both were escorted to their respective homes, which were searched without any court order. They were then brought back to the police station and detained until May 4 after which they were transferred to Nekemte prison. Until now they have not been brought before a court of law.</p> <p><b><u>Ato Ayana Qebeta</u></b> - A teacher of Oromifa, Ato Ayana was told that the police were looking for him. Upon arrival at the police station, he was arrested, on April 13 and kept there until May 11 after which he was transferred to Nekemte prison.</p>
3	<p><b><u>Student Qenea Birhanu</u></b> was detained until May 10 at a police station and then transferred to Nekemte prison on May 11. The nine students listed below were detained at Nekemte police station until April 23 without any court order.</p>
4	<p><b><u>Student Hawi Amanuel (female)</u></b></p>
5	<p><b><u>" Samuel Denbi</u></b></p>
6	<p><b><u>" Ibilla Tolossa</u></b></p>
7	<p><b><u>" Birhanu Workneh</u></b></p>
8	<p><b><u>" Bejiga Fikadu</u></b></p>
9	<p><b><u>" Dawit Wagari</u></b></p>
10	<p><b><u>" Workineh Bekele</u></b></p>
11	<p><b><u>" Bejiga Fikadu Kebede</u></b></p>
12	<p><b><u>" Samuel Joti</u></b></p>
13	

## Violations committed after 13 April 2000

- On 14 and 16 of April the officials of the regional administration called the residents of the town to a meeting. The administrator of East Wellega zone chaired the meeting.
- At the meeting, decisions were passed on various issues. Accordingly, it was agreed that officials of the regional administration would speak with students and their parents separately and that the deputy school director would instruct the parents to bring their children and register them at the school on 16 and 17 April.
- Nevertheless, despite this agreement, the regional administration detained the following twenty students beginning from 17 April.

Table 2. Students and others detained after 13 April

	Detainee's Name	Detention date	Detention place	Detainee's school
1	Student Dessalegn Fita	April 27/2000	Nekemte prison	Nekemte secondary school
2	" Iftu Wedajo	May 1/2000	Nekemte police station	" " "
3	" Abebech Gelalcha	"	" " "	" " "
4	" Gemta Dugasa	"	Nekemte prison	" " "
5	" Mohamed Dawd	" 4/2000	Nekemte police station	" " "
6	" Daniel Getachew	"	" " "	" " "
7	" Adisu Dessalegn	"	" " "	" " "
8	" Bulcha Gemeda	" 1/2000	" " "	Dergi secondary school
9	" Tilaye Fikadu	"	" " "	" " "
10	" Abdu Ali	"	" " "	" " "
11	" Tewodros Shiferaw	"	" " "	" " "
12	" Getu Amenu	"	" " "	Nekemte Biftu secondary school
13	" Melkamu Mulugeta	"	" " "	Bikiltu Leka elementary school
14	" Lulseged Shiferaw	"	" " "	Nekemte Burka elementary school
15	" Yohannes Tsegaye	"	" " "	Nekemte secondary school
16	" Getu Benti	" 11/200	" " "	" " "
17	" Chala Olana	"	" " "	" " "
18	" Terefe Adugna	"	" " "	" " "
19	" Gemta Deresa	"	" " "	" " "
20	Ato Temesgen Tolosa	" 25/2000	" " "	Guard at Nekemte secondary school

□

As this report was being released, those students and teachers detained in Nekemte police station and prison are reported to have been released on July 17.

## Human Rights Violations in Ghimbi Town

Similar violations were committed against students of Ghimbi comprehensive high school. The following fifteen students are known to be detained until the time that this report was being prepared:

Table 3. Students detained since April 11, 2000

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	Student's name		Student's name
1	Teferi Merga_	10	Etagegn Yohannes (female)_
2	Gelan Yohannes	11	Kedir Nasir
3	Guta Turana	12	Mohammed Ahmed
4	Mezgebu Terfasa	13	Zerihun Bekele
5	Bikila Haile	14	Bikila Mizanu

6	Nuriya Yassin	15	Seleshi Tolan
7	Zeyneba Ali		
8	Zeyneba Jemal		
9	Demelash Tamiru		

## Conclusion

These students had tried to present their demands peacefully, but were unable to get satisfactory replies. Instead of cooling them down through advice and open discussion, the gates of their schools were shut and police and other security officers were ordered to fire at them. EHRCO strongly condemns the illegal actions taken against students, teachers and other civilians in Nekemte and Ghimbi because

- *Though reportedly aimed at ensuring public peace and security, these actions of government officials and armed security officers resulted in frightening the students who had nothing more than their pens and books on them.*
- *Opening fire and wounding some of the students and beating and torturing students and other civilians violate the country's laws as well as those international human rights instruments accepted and ratified by the government, and*
- *Subjecting students and other peaceful citizens to illegal detention and disappearance violate the rule of law.*

EHRCO demands of the government to bring those persons responsible for these illegal actions before a court of law. It calls upon all those committed to ensuring the rule of law and the respect of human rights to write to the following government bodies and officials supporting EHRCO's demands:

### Copy to:

- Council of Peoples Representatives  
P. O. Box: 80001; Fax: (251-1) 550900  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Federal Council, FDRE  
P. O. Box: 80001; Fax: (251-1) 550900  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- H.E. Dr. Negasso Gidada, FDRE President

P. O. Box: 1031; Fax (251-1) 552020

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

- H.E. Ato Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister of the FDRE

P. O. Box: 1031; Fax (251-1) 552020

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

- H.E. Ato Woredewold Wolde, FDRE Minister of Justice

P. O. Box: 1370; Fax : (251-1) 550722

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

- Oromia Regional Council

P. O. Box 272; Fax: (251-05) 518722

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.