

Introduction

On 10 December 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Most member States of the UN have signed and ratified the Declaration, committing themselves to ensuring the respect and protection of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all peoples.

Along with what States are doing to ensure the respect and protection of the rights and fundamental freedoms of their people, other concerned individuals and organisations are making their own contributions to this universal objective. In addition to teaching the public about its rights and fundamental freedoms, these individuals and groups advocate the recognition and protection of these rights and freedoms, the rule of law and peaceful struggle for democracy. They raise their voices whenever these rights and fundamental freedoms are in any way violated.

Unfortunately, in trying to carry out this work, these human rights workers constantly face numerous obstacles. The harassment and maltreatment posed by different organs and officials of government are among the most important of these obstacles. This problem is particularly most serious in non-democratic countries where the rule of law and the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms are as yet not ensured.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) has had its share of continuous harassment, threats and outright violation of its rights and fundamental freedoms. Ever since its establishment, the Ethiopian Government has been taking many illegal actions against EHRCO's members, staff and supporters. These actions have often put the very existence of the Council itself under serious question.

As of recent years, there has been an increasing international demand for the recognition and protection of the rights and freedoms of human rights defenders. On 9 December 1998, the United Nations' General Assembly passed a resolution adopting the **Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms**. In spite of this, however, the illegal actions against EHRCO have been worsening from time to time.

Articles 1 and 2 of the above Declaration state the following:

Article 1

Everyone has the right, individually or together with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national or international levels.

Article 2

1. Each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms, inter alia, by adopting such steps as may be necessary to create all conditions necessary in the social, economic, political and other fields, as well as the legal guarantees required to ensure that all persons under its jurisdiction, individually or in association with others, are able to enjoy all those rights

and freedoms in practice.

2. Each State shall adopt such legislative, administrative and other steps as may be necessary to ensure that the rights and freedoms referred to in the present Declaration are effectively guaranteed.

In contravention of this Declaration, EHRCO's members, staff and supporters have been subjected to the following harassment, threats and maltreatment.

Violations of the Rights of EHRCO's Workers & Supporters

EHRCO has been issuing numerous reports on the human rights situation in the country. It is only after collecting and verifying information that EHRCO issues its reports. To collect and verify information, EHRCO usually dispatches its staff and, when necessary, members and supporters to those places where complaints and reports of human rights violations are said to have occurred. But, in trying to carry out their assignments, EHRCO's workers often face many difficulties. These include maltreatment and threats by officials and armed government cadres of the different regions of the country.

In accordance with the law, EHRCO has been registered and issued a certificate or registration (No. 376) by the appropriate department of the Federal Ministry of Justice. As such, it is a legitimate organisation that can and should be able to operate in any of the country's administrative regions. Following its official recognition by the Federal Government, EHRCO has been able to establish five branch offices in as many of the country's major administrative regions. However, as of recent times, officials of some of these regional governments have been telling its staff that the certificate of registration issued to it by the Federal Ministry of Justice was not sufficient for them to operate in those regions and should, therefore, secure permits from the regions' administrations every time its workers wanted to work in those regions. This difficulty has occurred repeatedly in Orimiya and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional States. These regional officials insist that EHRCO's staff inform them of their movements and the individuals they plan to meet and/or interview. A number of EHRCO's monitors who declined to comply have been accused of violating regional rules for which they have been detained and maltreated. This action of the regional officials violates Article 32 (1) of the FDRE constitution, which provides the following:

Any Ethiopian or foreign national lawfully in Ethiopia has, within the national territory, the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his residence, as well as the freedom to leave the country at any time he wishes to.

· To collect as much reliable information regarding the ethnic conflict reported to have been occurring in various Peasant Associations in East Wellega, staff from EHRCO's headquarters, the head of its Bahir Dar branch office and one supporter from Addis Ababa were dispatched to the area. Two of EHRCO's staff members and one supporter were subjected to the following violations of their rights and fundamental freedoms.

1. **Ato Alemayehu Fanta** is the head of EHRCO's branch office in Bahir Dar.

Following instructions given to him from EHRCO's headquarters, he travelled to East Wellega. He was arrested on 19 December 2000 for entering Oromiya Region without

the knowledge and permission of the region's officials. He was released on Birr 1000 bail eighteen days later.

2. **Ato Wondimagegn Gashu** is a staff member of EHRCO's headquarters. He left Addis Ababa on 18 December for East Wellega. Upon arrival he was maltreated and harassed by local officials and armed security persons. Moreover, on 19 December Gida Kiramo *Wereda* police detained him for a day and a half, instructing him to return to where he had come from.

3. **Ato Getaneh Dimtsu** lives in Addis Ababa. As one of EHRCO's supporters, he left for East Wellega along with EHRCO's headquarters staff. On 19 December 2000, he was arrested by Gida Kiramo *Wereda* police and detained for 71 days at Nekemte prison. He was released on 28 February 2001 on Birr 1500 bail.

· **Ato Wondimagegn Gashu & Ato Yared Hailemariam** are two staff members of EHRCO's headquarters in Addis Ababa. Government officials and armed security persons have subjected both to similar harassment and maltreatment. Both had gone to Omo Sheleko *Wereda*, Kembata and Alaba-Tenbaro Zone, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State to investigate reports of human rights violations within a number of peasant associations in the region. On March 19 and in accordance with information that had reached EHRCO earlier, these human rights workers left for Mudula, the place identified as the one where many human rights violations were reported to have occurred. On arrival they reported to the *Wereda* police, identifying themselves and the reason for their presence in the *Wereda*. The commander of the *Wereda* police station examined their identification cards and provided them with information on the reported human rights violations in the *Wereda*.

The police officer informed them that many residents of the *Wereda* were under detention by armed government security. EHRCO's workers requested and were given the permission to visit these detainees. Informing them that the majority of these prisoners were kept in Ferzano Peasant Association, the police officer agreed to take them there himself. However, the officer took EHRCO's workers to a place where there were no prisoners. He was unwilling to explain his behaviour. Later, after consulting with members of Mudula town council, he told EHRCO's workers that he would take them to the prisoners if and when they are able to bring an authorisation letter from the Council of Durame Zone. Following this, the police started arresting the people they suspected of talking to the two EHRCO workers. On 24 March, EHRCO's workers were preparing to leave for Durame, the Zone's town, when the police threateningly ordered the drivers of the buses not to transport EHRCO's workers. EHRCO's workers tried again next morning. The police searched them. They then travelled on a truck toward the town. When they came to Adero town, the police had blocked the road, the truck was stopped, and the two EHRCO workers were ordered to disembark. They were then taken to the town's police station for questioning. The workers were told that the Mudula's police commander had phoned, ordering their detention until he could come. He arrived, accompanied by a number of armed policemen, an hour later. The police officer told EHRCO's workers that their presence in the *Wereda* was illegal as they did not have any permit from the Zone and that the Zone and *Wereda* administrations would like to talk them. For this, they were told they had to return to Mudula town. Since EHRCO's workers refused to be taken back to

Mudula, they were escorted to Durame police instead. The officials of the Zone asked them why they were in the Zone without the necessary permit. Even though EHRCO's workers tried to explain why and for what purpose they were in the Zone, the officials warned them against doing the same in the future. After a great deal of harassment and threat, EHRCO's workers were finally released and allowed to return to Addis Ababa.

Conclusion

It has been repeatedly pointed out that EHRCO was a non-governmental and non-partisan organisation established to work for the establishment of a democratic system, to ensure the rule of law, and to promote and protect human rights. Even though the issues that EHRCO raises are political in nature, EHRCO itself is not a political party and does not vie for political power. Consequently, EHRCO does not support or oppose any of the political parties competing for such power. EHRCO's only partisanship is for democracy, the rule of law and due process, and the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Ever since its establishment in 1991, EHRCO has been striving for the attainment of its objectives. During these ten years, it has had many trials and obstacles. Its application to register in accordance with the country's laws was refused for over eight years; the funds it had in its account at the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia were blocked for over five years; one of its members was arbitrarily executed in broad daylight, others were imprisoned, harassed, and threatened. And now as indicated in this report, regional officials and armed security persons are subjecting EHRCO's workers, members and supporters to arbitrary detentions, threats and harassment.

EHRCO is strongly opposed to this violation of the rights and fundamental freedom of its members, workers and supporters. It calls upon all those individuals and groups committed to democracy, the rule of law, and the respect and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms to give it their support. Individuals and groups in Ethiopia and abroad are hereby called upon to write to the officials and institutions of the Ethiopian Government listed below requesting them to help stop this violation of the rights and fundamental freedoms of EHRCO's members, workers and supporters.

Copy to:

- The Council of Peoples Representatives
P. O. Box 80001; Fax No. (251-1) 550900; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- The Federal Council
P. O. Box 80001; Fax No. (251-1) 550722, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- H. E. Dr. Negasso Gidada, FDRE President
P. O. Box 1031; Fax No. (251-1) 552020, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- H. E. Mr. Meles Zenawi, FDRE Prime Minister
P. O. Box 1031; Fax No. (251-1) 552020, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- H. E. Mr. Woredewold Wolde, FDRE Minister of Justice
P. O. Box 1370; Fax No. (251-1) 520874, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- Regional Council, Southern Nations, Nationalities & Peoples Regional State
P. O. Box 18; Fax No. (251-6) 201050, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- Regional Council, Oromiya Regional State
P. O. Box 101769; Fax No. (251-1) 513642, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

