



Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

Ethiopia - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on Tuesday 18 December 2012

Information on Human Rights organisation 'Human Rights Council' including treatment by the authorities of employees

A report published by *Amnesty International* in October 2012 notes:

"Amnesty International, CIVICUS and Human Rights Watch are deeply concerned at the 19 October 2012 decision by Ethiopia's Supreme Court to uphold the freezing of the assets of the Human Rights Council, Ethiopia's leading, and oldest, human rights organization..." (Amnesty International (19 October 2012) *Ethiopia: Supreme Court ruling marks a further erosion of human rights work in Ethiopia*).

This document also points out that:

"The decision of the Supreme Court represents the acquiescence of the courts in the ongoing targeting of independent human rights organizations in Ethiopia, which has resulted in the near total demolition of human rights civil society in the country. The decision upholds the confiscation of substantial funding from the Human Rights Council (HRCO) – an organization with a strong track record of independent monitoring, documenting and advocacy on human rights issues..." (ibid).

This report also states:

"As a result of the restrictions in the CSO law and the freezing of their accounts, HRCO has been forced to close nine of its twelve offices and cut 85 per cent of its staff" (ibid).

In February 2012 *Human Rights Watch* states:

"HRCO (formerly known as the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, EHRCO) has been the leading human rights voice in the country, with a strong track record of investigating and reporting on violations and promoting human rights in the country since its establishment in 1991. As a result of the restrictions in the CSO law and the freezing of its accounts, HRCO has been forced to close nine of its twelve offices and cut 85 per cent of its staff" (Human Rights Watch (1 February 2012) *Ethiopia: Future of last remaining human rights monitoring NGO in the balance*).

IRIN News in November 2012 states:

"The 1991 rebellion that ousted Mengistu paved the way for more democratic, member-constituted cooperatives, even as the government itself came under criticism over its commitment to democracy. General assembly members were elected to determine cooperatives' policies, and cooperatives began to adhere to the principles of the ICA. Over a decade later, NGOs became targets of government ire. Several were perceived as assisting Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's political opponents during the 2005 election, which nearly saw Meles's defeat, according to Stephan Klingelhofer, senior vice president at Washington-based the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law. In the following years, members of organizations such

as the Ethiopian Human Rights Council and the Swiss branch of Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) faced arrests and detentions” (IRIN News (7 November 2012) *Ethiopia: Cooperatives championed amid NGO restrictions*).

In March 2012 *Amnesty International* points out that:

“Ethiopia’s authorities have demonstrated hostility to human rights organizations for many years, including numerous threats and warnings being made to human rights defenders by state agents, surveillance of offices and individuals, arrests and prosecutions of human rights activists” (Amnesty International (12 March 2012) *Ethiopia: Stifling human rights work: The impact of civil society legislation in Ethiopia*, p.23).

This report also notes:

“In January 2009 the Ethiopian parliament passed into law the Charities and Societies Proclamation (No.621/2009). The law regulates non-governmental organizations, massmembership based societies, charitable trusts and foundations. The new legislation required every charity and society in the country to re-register under a newly created Charities and Societies Agency, and contains provisions on the composition and funding of organizations. The sector needed better regulation. However, the law that came into force places excessive restrictions on the work of human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The law provides the Charities and Societies Agency with substantial powers to interfere in the running, administration and planning of organizations, which, among other concerns, jeopardises the security of victims of human rights violations. The law restricts the rights of freedom of expression and association of human rights defenders, and of the Ethiopian public, in violation of the Ethiopian government’s obligations under national and international law. Infringements of the law’s provisions could lead to heavy fines or imprisonment for NGO staff. In practice, the law has had a devastating impact on human rights work in Ethiopia. Since the law was passed human rights organizations have decreased in number, many have changed the focus of their mandate, and those human rights organizations who have ‘survived’ have significantly scaled down their activities due to the major impact of funding restrictions. Offices have been closed, and large numbers of staff have lost their jobs. Development organizations have abandoned the ‘rights-based approach’ to development” (ibid, p.5).

This document also states:

“This long-standing hostility to human rights organizations has been institutionalised in the Charities and Societies Proclamation, placing heavy restrictions on their work and threatening human rights defenders with imprisonment for transgressing the law. The law has increased the climate of fear in which human rights defenders operate. A number of human rights defenders fled the country after the law was passed” (ibid, p.23).

This report also notes:

“Since 1991 the Human Rights Council (HRCO) has conducted extensive work in monitoring and documenting human rights abuses across Ethiopia. The organizational objectives are to encourage and monitor the respect for human rights in Ethiopia; to promote the rule of law and due process; and to contribute to the establishment of a democratic system. Before the law was passed, HRCO had 12

branch offices across the country, 58 staff members, and was the only organization conducting field-based human rights research. It also carried out human rights education, advocacy, trial monitoring, detention centre visits, information dissemination, election monitoring and voter education, provided human rights training, including for security forces and judicial officials, and legal support to victims of human rights violations. Before the law was passed, HRCO were undertaking significant levels of human rights work across the country” (ibid, p.23).

It is also pointed out in this report that:

“The law has caused a substantial reduction in the scale and breadth of work carried out by HRCO. In the initial stages of implementation of the law, a number of HRCO staff members, including the Executive Director, fled the country. As a result of the financial restrictions contained in the law, HRCO have been forced to close nine of their twelve branch offices and had to lay off 49 of their 58 staff, or 85 percent of their original workforce” (ibid, p.23).

The website of the Human Rights Council is <http://www.ehrco.org/>

References

Amnesty International (19 October 2012) *Ethiopia: Supreme Court ruling marks a further erosion of human rights work in Ethiopia*
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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

Sources Consulted

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