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Human Rights Council

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
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Brief description of CPJ

1. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) is an independent, nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide. We defend the right of journalists to report the news without fear of reprisal.

Executive Summary

2. In this submission, CPJ summarizes five years of research on press freedom conditions in Ethiopia. The submission outlines the extensive number of arrests and arbitrary detentions of journalists; failure to provide accountability in the killing of two journalists and other physical attacks on members of the press; the forced closure of media outlets; and restricted access for international journalists.
3. In conclusion, CPJ finds significant deterioration since Ethiopia's last UPR and makes recommendations to the government of Ethiopia to halt the ongoing repression of the media.

Legal framework

4. Article 29 of the Ethiopian constitution guarantees freedom of expression while Article 47 of the Ethiopian media law affirms that the press should be free "from governmental, political or economic influence".
5. Ethiopia is a party to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which obligate the country to ensure freedom of expression and the right to access information.

Implementation of recommendations from the previous UPR

6. Following the third cycle UPR of Ethiopia (2019 –33rd session), Ethiopia supported nine recommendations on the media as well as freedom of expression (Annex A), including to amend problematic anti-terror and media laws, and to "[e]nsure that journalists and human rights defenders undertake their work in a free environment" (Paragraph 163.219 -Chile). While Ethiopia has made progress in legislative reform, laws are still subject to weaponization against the press and the country has broadly failed to create an environment where the media can operate freely and without fear of reprisal.

Killings and physical attacks on journalists

7. There has been impunity for perpetrators of physical attacks against members of the press, including in the cases of two killed journalists.
8. No credible investigation was carried out into the January 19, 2021 killing of Tigray TV journalist Dawit Kebede Araya. Ethiopian national army soldiers shot and killed Dawit

and a friend in Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray state. A witness cited in a November 2021 joint report by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights said the soldiers seemed to have "directly aimed" at the vehicle in which Dawit and his friend were riding.

9. On February 8, 2021, armed men believed to be intelligence officers raided the home of freelancer Lucy Kassa. They assaulted and threatened her.
10. Oromia Broadcasting Network journalist Sisay Fida was fatally shot on May 9, 2021 in Dembi Dollo, a town in Oromia state. Authorities attributed the killing to the Oromo Liberation Army, an insurgent group which denied the allegations. There has been no credible investigation.

Repressive laws

11. Despite reforms over the last five years, Ethiopia's media and anti-terror laws retain provisions that have been used to persecute dissenting voices, to justify media closures, and as pretext for the expulsion of foreign journalists.
12. In 2021, Ethiopia enacted the Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021, which established a statutory media industry regulatory body, the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA). This law also recognized emerging media formats, decriminalized defamation, instituted safeguards against arbitrary impoundment of publications, and prohibited pre-trial detention for media-related offenses. However, requirements for journalists to register with authorities have been used to suppress media freedom. In particular:
    a. On March 4, 2021, the EMA revoked the reporting credentials of New York Times reporter Simon Marks , following allegations that he had published "fake news" in his coverage of the 2020-2022 Ethiopian civil war. On May 20, 2021, Marks was deported.
    b. On July 15, 2021, the EMA withdrew the operating license of the news site Addis Standard, citing vague concerns that the outlet was undermining national security. Addis Standard resumed operations after a week.
    c. The EMA withdrew the press accreditation of Economist correspondent Tom Gardner on May 13, 2022, after alleging that he "failed to live to [the] standards of conduct for journalists". He was expelled from the country.
    d. In January 2023, Ethiopia's Somali Regional State suspended 15 foreign media outlets and revoked a media association's license, citing non-compliance with federal licensing requirements.
13. Since the last UPR, Ethiopia enacted a new anti-terror law, the Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism Crimes Proclamation No. 1176/2020. Ethiopia also enacted the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No. 1185/2020, in response to legitimate concerns over dangerous speech online. However,

both these laws have been used as tools against dissenting voices. The rest of this submission details the arrests of journalists over the last five years, and will highlight specific instances where these laws, as well as the country's criminal code, have been used to persecute journalists.

Detention of journalists

14. Ethiopia ranked among the top three worst jailers of journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2020, 2021, and 2023, according to CPJ's annual Prison Census, a snapshot of journalists behind bars on December 1 each year.
15. These rankings point to a broader concern. Over the last five years, Ethiopia has entrenched a pattern of arbitrarily detaining journalists. There was an uptick of arrests during the two year period of the Tigray civil war (November 2020-November 2022), when security personnel took at least 63 journalists into custody, often accusing them of links to rebel forces or justifying their detention with state of emergency laws.
16. Only a few of those detained were formally charged. Most were held in prolonged pre-charge detention, amid investigations into vague speech or anti-state offenses. On several occasions, police failed to comply with or maneuvered around court orders to release journalists on bail.
17. Since 2020, CPJ has also documented the detention of journalists in unofficial sites, including at the notorious Awash Arba military camp in eastern Ethiopia. In Awash Arba journalists were held without judicial oversight, access to family or legal counsel. In October 2023 detainees at Awash Arba, including several journalists, went on hunger strike to protest poor conditions.
18. With the exception of nine journalists who remain detained at the time of writing in March 2024, all journalists whose cases are outlined below have since been released. Unless otherwise stated, journalists whose cases are outlined below were never formally charged. Further details are in Annex B.

Detentions in 2020

19. On March 7, security personnel arrested broadcast journalists Dessu Dulla and Wako Nole after accusing them of illegal photography near a police station. They were detained until May 30, after police ignored several court orders for their release.
20. Federal police arrested online journalist Yayesew Shimelis on March 27 and in April he was charged with breaching the hate speech and disinformation law. His charges stemmed from a Facebook post about COVID-19 preparations in Ethiopia, and he was the first journalist indicted under the hate speech and disinformation law. He was released on bail after nearly a month in prison.

21. In July, authorities arrested Kenyan journalist Yassin Juma and Oromia Media Network's Melese Direbssa, Guyo Wariyo, Mohammed Siraj, and Chibsa Abdulkerim. They were accused of incitement to violence in connection to unrest that followed the killing of a popular musician. Only Melese was formally charged, and he was held until January 2022 when the incitement charges against him were dropped.
22. In August, security personnel arrested Belay Manaye, Mulugeta Anberbir, Misgana Kefelegn, and Yonatan Mulugeta, all associated with the Amhara Satellite and Radio Television (ASRAT), on allegations of incitement to violence. They were released without formal charge in September.
23. In November, security personnel arrested Bekalu Alamrew, a reporter with the private broadcaster Awlo Media Center; Medihane Ekubamichael, Addis Standard editor; Udii Musaa, questioned in connection to his previous work with the Oromia Media Network; state media journalists Haftu Gebregzhiabher, Tsegaye Hagos, and Abreha Hagos; and Dawit Kebede, managing editor of the online media outlet Awramba Times. These journalists faced accusations that included disseminating false information and committing offenses against Ethiopia's constitution.

Detentions in 2021

24. On February 27 and on March 1, Ethiopian military forces in Mekelle arrested Fitsum Berhane and Alula Akalu, translators for Agence France-Presse (AFP) and Financial Times respectively, Tamrat Yemane, a local fixer and reporter, and Girmay Gebru of the BBC's Tigrinya service. Fitsum would later tell AFP that the soldiers threatened to kill him.
25. In late June and early July, police arrested 15 journalists and media workers. 12 of them were employees of the online broadcaster Awlo Media Center, including Bekalu Alamrew who was facing his second arrest during the war. Yayesew Shimelis was arrested, for the second time since 2020, alongside his Ethio Forum colleague Abebe Bayu. They were held at Awash Arba military camp and later released without formal charges.
26. In October, security personnel in Addis Ababa arrested Ahadu Radio's Luwam Atikilti and Kibrom Worku , accused of communicating with a terror group, and Tesfa-Alem Tekle, a correspondent with the Kenya-based Nation Media Group who was accused of having links to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), whose forces were fighting the federal government in the civil war.
27. On November 2, Ethiopia declared a state of emergency. At least 15 journalists were arrested in a crackdown on the press in the weeks that followed.
28. Those detained under the state of emergency included Ermias Tesfaye, a reporter with the news and analysis website Ethiopia Insight as well as former state media journalists Teklehaimanot Girmai and Mekonnen Yibrah.

29. Four journalists from Nabad TV were arrested in Jigjiga, the capital of the Somali regional state, and were all accused of breaching the hate speech and disinformation law.
30. Amir Aman Kirayo, a freelance video journalist accredited with the Associated Press, was arrested alongside two other journalists, Thomas Engida and Addisu Muluneh. They were accused of violating the state of emergency and anti-terrorism laws.
31. Oromia News Network journalists Bikila Amenu and Dessu Dulla , who was previously detained in 2020, were arrested on November 18. In April 2022, officials in Oromia charged them with "outrages against the constitution", which carries the death penalty. Both journalists were released in November 2022 following their acquittal.
32. In December 2021, authorities arrested Eyasped Tesfaye, editor-in-chief of Ubuntu TV, Temerat Negara, co-founder of Terara Network who was initially held at an undisclosed location for a week, and Meaza Mohammed, founder of Roha TV whose reporting included coverage of sexual violence in the context of the civil war in northern Ethiopia.

Detentions in 2022

33. On May 1, armed men abducted Gobeze Sisay, founder of Voice of Amhara YouTube channel. He was held blindfolded for over a week at an unknown location.
34. Between May 19 and May 21, police in the Amhara State and in Addis Ababa arrested 11 journalists and media workers from Ashara Media, Nisir International Broadcasting Corporation, and Ethio Nekat Media.
35. Temesgen Desalegn, editor of Feteh magazine, was arrested on May 26. A month later he was charged with disclosing military secrets and disseminating subversive information, offenses punishable by life imprisonment. Despite being granted bail in July, he remained detained until November. His case is ongoing as of March 2024.
36. On May 27, security personnel arrested Bekalu Alamrew again. He was working with another YouTube-based outlet, Alpha TV, following the shuttering of Awlo Media Center. On May 28, Meaza Mohammed was arrested for the second time since the start of the civil war. They were both accused of incitement and detained until June.
37. Tigrayan authorities arrested five journalists in Mekelle in late May and early June, accusing all of them of "collaboration with the enemy" due to their alleged associations with the Ethiopian federal government.
38. Ethio Forum's Abebe Bayu and Yayesew Shimelis were arrested again in late June and were detained incommunicado until July 8.
39. In September, police arrested Meaza Mohamed, her third arrest since the start of the civil war, Gobeze Sisay, his second detention during the civil war, and Abay Zewdu, a journalist with the online outlet Amara Media Center. The accusations against them included spreading false information, inciting violence, and having links to the TPLF.

40. In November, Natnael Gecho, founder of the Wolaita Times news site, was detained in southern Ethiopia, and was accused of spreading misinformation and tarnishing the image of authorities.
41. On December 13, federal police arrested Ethio Nikat founder Meskerem Abera, her second arrest within a year, and accused her of inciting violence and defaming the military. She was released on bail in January 2023.

Detentions in 2023

42. Two journalists and a media worker with the YouTube-based outlet Ethio Selam were arrested in February in connection to their coverage of a rift within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.
43. Beyene Wolde, founder and editor of Gurage Media Network, was arrested on March 2 in Addis Ababa on accusations of terrorism and incitement, after covering protests in the region.
44. Getenet Ashagre of The Voice of Amhara and Aragaw Sisay of Roha News were arrested in Addis Ababa on March 26 and accused of incitement to violence.
45. Amid renewed conflict in the Amhara State, seven journalists were arrested in April and May. One of these journalists was Gobeze Sisay, facing his third detention in two years. He was arrested in Djibouti and transferred back to Ethiopia under unclear circumstances. Gobeze was charged under the anti-terrorism law, alongside three of the journalists who were arrested in April 2023: Meskerem Abera, Dawit Begashaw, and Genet Asmamaw. As of March 2024, their case remains at the pre-trial stage. If convicted, they face penalties ranging from fifteen years to life imprisonment or the death penalty.
46. On August 4, Ethiopia declared another state of emergency in response to the conflict in the Amhara state between government forces and the Fano, an armed militia. The state of emergency law, still in force as of March 2024, grants security personnel wide powers of arrest and provides for the suspension of the due process of law, including the right to appear before a court and receive legal counsel.
47. Eight journalists were arrested between August and November under the provisions of this state of emergency law. Four of these journalists – Yidnekachew Kebede of Negari TV, Fekadu Mahtemework of Ghion Magazine, Yehualashet Zerihun of Tirita 97.6 FM and Nigussie Berhanu of Yegna TV– were released on bail after several weeks behind bars. As of March 2024, the other four journalists remain behind bars. They are Bekalu Alamrew, his fourth arrest since 2020; Abay Zewdu, who has been arrested at least twice before; Tewodros Zerfu, a show host and commentator on the YouTube based Menelik TV and Yegna TV; and Belay Manaye, who was previously detained in 2020. They were initially held in Addis Ababa for the first weeks of their detention, before

being transferred to Awash Arba military camp, where they did not have access to family or legal counsel. In January 2024, Abay and Bekalu were transferred back to Addis Ababa.

Detentions in 2024

48. French journalist Antoine Galindo was arrested in Ethiopia on February 22 while interviewing an opposition political officer. Authorities detained him for a week, accusing him of incitement and "overstepping" his journalist accreditation.
49. Muhiyadin Mohamed Abdullahi, who publishes reporting and commentary on Facebook, was arrested on February 13, 2024 and remained behind bars in late March 2024. Charged with disinformation and incitement, he faces up to five years behind bars if convicted.

Recommendations

50. Immediately and unconditionally release all journalists who remain behind bars in connection to their work.
51. Urgently investigate the arbitrary detentions of journalists and reports of violations, including physical assaults by security personnel. Hold perpetrators accountable and accord journalists who have suffered these violations enforceable rights to compensation and other reparation.
52. Stop using state of emergency legislation to detain journalists and to censor the media.
53. Ensure prompt and thorough investigations into attacks on the press, including the killings of Sisay Fida and Dawit Kebede Araya. Hold perpetrators accountable in fair and transparent judicial proceedings.
54. Amend laws that restrict press freedom and are used to target journalists, including provisions in the Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021, the Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism Crimes Proclamation No. 1176/2020, and the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No. 1185/2020.
55. Ensure that the criminal code, anti-terrorism legislation, and the hate speech laws are aligned with international human rights standards and obligations related to freedom of expression and the press, as outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.
56. Desist from weaponizing accreditation processes to deny access to international media, shutter news outlets and to justify journalist arrests and other violations of press freedom.
57. Ensure that journalists can report matters of public interest, including conflict, without fear of reprisal or intimidation.