



Human Rights Watch Statement
Item 6 - UPR outcome report of Ethiopia
13th Session of the HRC - March 19, 2010

Human Rights Watch welcomes the UPR report on Ethiopia in which the Ethiopian delegation voiced Ethiopia's commitment to continuing cooperation with the United Nations human rights organs.

It is therefore disappointing that Ethiopia rejected important recommendations that could have a very significant and positive impact on the human rights situation in the country. However, the continuing armed insurgencies faced by Ethiopia provide no justification for the rapidly deteriorating conditions for freedom of expression, association and assembly.

The government has expressed support for a number of recommendations aimed at combating gender discrimination, sexual violence, abuse of children and other serious human rights concerns. Yet a strong, vibrant and independent civil society is essential to the success of these efforts. However, the environment for independent voices in Ethiopia, namely human rights defenders, the independent media and political opposition, has dramatically worsened even in comparison to a year ago. Reversing this worrying trend should be seen as a top priority throughout the implementation of the UPR outcome.

We urge the government to amend the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law), which violates Ethiopia's strong constitutional protections for the rights to freedom of association, expression and opinion. Our concerns that the repressive provisions contained in the CSO law might reflect a broader governmental hostility towards independent civil society has, regrettably, proven correct in 2009. The situation is now urgent. In the past six months many Ethiopian human rights defenders have fled the country due to threats and intimidation. Several of the most prominent human rights organizations have been forced to remove human rights activity from their mandates, close many of their offices, and have seen their bank accounts frozen. Three of the four human rights groups who made submissions for the UPR of Ethiopia in early 2009 withdrew from submitting further material due to fear of government

reprisals. We regret the rejection by Ethiopia of the numerous recommendations proposed during the UPR in this regard.

As Ethiopia nears elections in May, members of the political opposition face both direct threats and more subtle pressures. Opposition supporters have been attacked and arbitrarily detained, including Birtukan Midekssa, leader of the Unity, Democracy and Justice party, who was deemed a victim of arbitrary detention by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in December 2009. The government should immediately and unconditionally release her and other political opposition members who have been arbitrarily detained, as recommended by Canada. However, the more pervasive form of repression is more subtle, involving threats, harassment, closure of offices, breaking up of meetings, and denial of access to state resources unless individuals agree to support the ruling party. Again, by rejecting many recommendations in this regard, Ethiopia has missed an opportunity to make important human rights commitments. Human Rights Watch urges the government to issue clear and public orders to all government officials – particularly at the district (woreda) and village (kebele) levels – that opposition supporters must be allowed to carry out their meetings and campaigning free of harassment and intimidation.

The Ethiopian security forces continue to commit serious abuses against the political opposition and during operations against armed insurgent groups with total impunity. The government's rejection of recommendations that could promote accountability and end the prevailing impunity for serious crimes by state security forces, such as in Somali Region, is discouraging. An important first step towards building accountability would be to immediately facilitate independent investigation by the UN special procedures and other independent investigators to areas where serious abuses have occurred, as in Ethiopia's Somali Region, as recommended by a number of states including the United Kingdom and Switzerland.