

# Ethiopians Go to Congress to Fight Autocratic Regime

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SAN JOSE, Calif. — Ethiopian Americans, many of whom fled Ethiopia for political reasons, are using democratic channels in the U.S. to establish democratic reform in their homeland.

Through elected representatives, the Ethiopian Americans Council (EAC) has introduced a bill (H.R. 5321) in the House of Representatives that urges the Ethiopian government to run free and honest elections that allow opposition parties to participate without fear of violent retribution.

The bill, sponsored by Congressssmen Mike Honda, (D-CA), Donald Payne (D-NJ) and Ed Royce (R-CA), also asks Congress to appropriate funds for monitoring the 2005 elections.

The U.S. acknowledged that the 2000 national and 2001 regional elections were mostly free and fair but still tainted by voter intimidation, killings and disappearances and unlawful detentions of opposition party supporters, particularly in the southern region.

The stakes are high as the country faces chronic food shortages. The international community was able to mount a successful relief effort to save 13 million people from starvation during 2002 and 2003, but there is no guarantee that that level of relief will always be available.

According to a report by the Ethiopian government and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Ethiopia's population has doubled in the last 20 years to 70 million and continued to grow by two million a year. Subsistence farmers can no longer feed the country and even in good years, five million people depend on western aid.

The report urges prompt action to control population, curtail damage to the environment, and institute land reform.

Abe Hailu, an EAC spokesperson from San Jose, Calif., said that government entrenchment in business is causing problems. There are a number of enterprises owned by the ruling party or controlled by the government including banks, transport, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and telecommunications. Private businesses find it impossible to compete against the government and party-owned companies who get the government contracts and control the biggest share of the market.

The leftist government also owns the land so that the farmers are working for the government. As a result, there has not been the capital investment to improve the land and farming methods.

With the government so heavily involved in the nation's business, it is even more necessary to have a transparent, democratic system to limit graft, corruption and ensure efficiency, but the government has prevented the press from operating freely.

According to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report of January of this year, the Ethiopian government has frequently harassed and arrested editors, publishers and reporters. They proposed a new press law to tighten government oversight of private newspapers and shut down the Ethiopian Free Journalists Association who opposed the law.

The government came to power in 1991 after a 10-year struggle to overthrow the despotic Communist regime known as the Dergue. But now the government is attaining some of Dergue's notoriety.

HRW also cited the massacres in the State of Gambella, the ethnic cleansing of the Anuak people of western Ethiopia last December and January. According to a joint report from Survivors' Rights International and Genocide Watch, the death toll may exceed 1,400, and government forces are alleged to have conducted killings of civilians, mass rapes, forced disappearances, torture, burning of homes and crops and illegal arrests and imprisonments. Government soldiers are said to have destroyed evidence of mass graves.

The U.S. State Department called for independent inquiries into the atrocities. The Ethiopian government said they will comply but has not yet produced any report.

Ethiopia is considered an important ally in the war on terrorism and received \$531 million in 2003, 88 percent going to famine relief.

Hailu thinks the United States should use its clout in granting assistance to Ethiopia. "The U.S. should say 'Bring democracy and then you will get assistance,'" he said.

Says the EAC, "With donor [wealthy nations who contribute money to developing countries] fatigue spreading throughout the world, it is imperative to have a democratically elected leadership in Ethiopia to tackle the pressing economic, social and political problems facing the country, before they escalate into a full-blown crisis."

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