

Solidarity Committee for Ethiopian Political Prisoners (SOCEPP – Canada)

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SOCEPP Canada concluded a successful public forum in Ottawa (Canada)

On January 15, 2011, a public meeting called by the Solidarity Committee for Ethiopian Political Prisoners Canada (SOCEPP Can) took place in the presence of concerned citizens, invited guests, parliamentarians and human rights groups in Canada's capital – Ottawa. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss major issues affecting present day Ethiopia and their implications for democratization and human rights in that country.

This meeting, which was attended by a significant number of Canadians of Ethiopian origin Ethiopians and Canadians, was addressed by five prominent individuals:

- Mr. Paul Dewar, Member of Canadian Parliament and the Foreign Affairs Critic of the New Democratic Party of Canada (NDP)
- Dr Busha Taa, Lecturer and Researcher, and former long time Chair of the Ethiopian Association in the Greater Toronto and the Surrounding Regions
- Mr. David Lord, Executive Director, Peace-build Canada
- Dr Ghelawdewos Araya , Professor of Education at City University of New York, and
- Dr Worku Aberra, Chair of the Economics Department, Dawson College - Montréal, Canada

In his opening remark, Mr. Paul Dewar stressed how concerned he was about the continued repression of Ethiopians by the current regime further stating that he even received credible reports on the misuse of international aid by the same regime for its political ends. He stressed that the time has come for donors to review their policies and assert their mandate to have a very close review of donor/role of promoting Human Rights in Ethiopia. He pledged to continue working to make sure that Canadian aid is not used to strengthening the arms of the ruling group and that he would continue to campaign to end repression in Ethiopia.

Mr. David Lord who spoke on the topic, " Prospects for Durable Peace in Africa and in Ethiopia, what needs to be done" elaborated on the human security essence of peace by stating that: "peace implies the absence of war, but also the general absence of violence within a society among and against people" and "positive peace" he adds: " is meant to describe people's general sense of physical security, as well as opportunities and processes to improve everyone's well-being within a society. Making progress implies finding solutions that provide the greatest benefits to the majority of the people, balancing the needs and interests of those who don't benefit, and, in all of this, preventing conflicting interests from turning violent and destructive."

He summarized his statement by stating "We are witnessing a number of positive developments and trends in terms of preventing and responding to violent conflicts in Africa, but it's also very obvious that millions of Africans are still directly affected by war, by predatory or ineffective governments, political repression, as well as the effects of poverty, unemployment and lack of education."

He stated that much work needs to be done to help build the conditions for political peace and physical security and that the way to do that involves not just political engagement and action but also economic and social development.

With regards to Ethiopia, he clearly stated that: “the prospects for peace in Ethiopia are very cloudy -- I am talking about both the absence of war and the more complicated definition that links physical safety and well-being with political and economic opportunities and freedoms.”

Describing how the continued repression of political rights increases the possibility for conflict, he stated, “Ethiopia now lacks an effective opposition with a public institutional platform for expressing alternative views, holding the government to account for its actions or inactions, and presumably presenting constructive political, economic and social options.”

Without a credible forum for open dialogue at the national or state levels, he adds, the country is missing what many consider essential mechanisms for national consensus-building and political problem-solving, as well as a safety valve to let off political and social pressure. “Manipulating election processes and suppressing legitimate dissent through the widespread use of state-sanctioned violence by the security apparatus, rather than reducing risks to those in power, I would think increase them”

He concluded by explicitly stating that “one prediction that is safe to make is that Ethiopians can expect the unexpected to happen and that Ethiopian men and women will continue to act to shape their futures.”

Dr Busha Taa discussed in depth how the 20 years ethnic focused politics of the ruling TPLF/EPRDF contributed for creating and maintaining discord and suspicion among the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups in the country and how it curtails human rights such as the freedom of movement etc.

He emphasized the need to address the grievances of diverse groups, the need to establish a system that celebrates the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Ethiopian people while respecting their commonalities, their shared heritage, and aspiration for respect, justice and unity.

Speaking on the role of the Diaspora for democratization in Ethiopia, Dr Ghelawdewos Araya stated that the Diaspora has been relentlessly and fervently seeking democracy in the Ethiopian setting for the last two decades. He further explained that: “in order to further understand the problem of democratization, the Ethiopian Diaspora must be able to evolve a modicum of democratic culture within itself and then strategize how to get rid of the undemocratic political system or regime in Ethiopia”.

Dr Ghelawdewos identified a number of shortcomings and challenges for democracy in Ethiopia and among the Diaspora community including:

1. The lack of tolerance to different ideas, agendas, and political programs

2. The ethnic divide and ethnic politics in Ethiopia that has surfaced during the rule of the EPRDF, but has now been emulated and exaggerated by Diaspora Ethiopians.
3. The global intervention in Ethiopian affairs that ironically contributed to the delay of the establishment of democracy in that country.

He concluded by stating "the democratic transformation of Ethiopia is not going to be easy, but it is not impossible to realize it. It may take time, but the democratization of Ethiopia is feasible and possible especially if all of us are engaged in planting the seeds of democratic ideals, very much like a gardener does in his/her garden feeding the soil with nutrients that would enrich it".

Dr Worku Abera, Chair of the Economics Department at Dawson College in Montréal, Canada, on his part explained how the ruling party's policies are based on discrimination and a purposeful effort to create hierarchy among the diverse linguistic groups within Ethiopia. He further explained that such discrimination is not sustainable and is not in the best interest of any one in Ethiopia. Dr. Worku's presentation was based on statistics from official sources within Ethiopia, as well as data used by international agencies.

The meeting concluded with a thank you note from Aklilu Wendaferew, Chair, SOCEPP Canada who indicated that this program was one of the many activities SOCEPP Canada plans to undertake to highlight the repression of human and political rights in Ethiopia including the case of the disappeared such as Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, Aberash Berta etc.

The presentations of Mr. David Lord and Dr Ghelawdewos Araya are posted on our web page at www.humanrightsethiopia.com . We will also make the other presentations available as soon as we receive the transcripts.

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