

The Empowerment Initiative

Human Rights, Social Justice, Non-Violence, Advocacy

OPEN LETTER TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS AND THE COALITION FOR H.R 2003

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Meles Zenawi tries to hold US elected officials hostage, too.

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has issued a threat. If pushed to comply with human rights based financial assistance from the United States, he will hold hostage the already imprisoned democratically-elected opposition leaders. Perhaps that could be restated as:

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi will continue to hold democratically-elected officials hostage, along with tens of thousands of innocent civilians, in direct defiance of basic respect for human rights.

Emboldened by his unchecked authority, maybe he thinks he can pull off this same stunt abroad. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is attempting to hold the United States Congress hostage.

The threat dangled before the US Congressmen and women of the House Africa Subcommittee and House Foreign Affairs Committee from Prime Minister Meles Zenawi asserts that the fate of the Kaliti prisoners will depend on the Committees' decision to mark-up H.R. 2003.

The reality, however, is that the fate of the Kaliti prisoners depends solely upon Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and he cannot displace that responsibility. He was wrong from the beginning to try to undermine his opposition and use strong arm tactics and violence against average citizens. He has handled the situation poorly ever since. The game is up and we see him for what he is.

He is a terrorist like any other around the world who takes hostages. The US, as we have seen, takes an unwavering stance against terrorists and will not be dictated by them... or will we?

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi pressures the US State Department with extortion and coercion to deliver his threats to Congress. (*He uses a handsomely paid cadre of lobbyists/messengers, as well.*) Understanding the gravity of this situation, where lives have been placed in the balance, the US State Department conveys his message at the moment well aware of the egregious violations that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has already waged against his own people.

With respect to Ethiopia, Prof. Alemayehu G. Mariam notes that the most recent US State Department Human Rights Report concludes that, "While the law provides for an independent judiciary, the judiciary remained weak and overburdened. The judiciary was perceived to be subject to significant political intervention."

Created to fund Ethiopia's civil infrastructure, H.R.2003 earmarks millions of dollars from the US to specifically strengthen the Ethiopian judiciary and increase its independence. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi stands to lose direct control of his Kangaroo court, so it is easy to see why he's obstructing this kind of funding.

The US State Department's report is quite extensive because the abuses in Ethiopia are many. Take for example these two excerpts addressing freedom of the press and academic freedom that Prof. Al Mariam highlights:

While the [Ethiopian] constitution and law provide for freedom of speech and press, the government restricted these rights in practice. The government continued to harass and prosecute journalists, publishers, and editors for publishing allegedly fabricated information and for other violations of the press law. The government continued to control all broadcast media. Private and government journalists routinely practiced self censorship.

The government restricted academic freedom during the year, maintaining that professors could not espouse political sentiments. Authorities did not permit teachers at any level to deviate from official lesson plans and discouraged political activity and association of any kind on university campuses. The government arrested students and teachers during the year. Professors and students were discouraged from taking positions not in accordance with government beliefs or practices.

So we are not merely dealing with a terrorist here, we are looking at a tyrant. And the US, as we have seen, takes an unwavering stance against tyrants and deposes them to liberate the oppressed... or do we?

From the highest office of our land, assurances have been offered that state, "All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you," unless, of course, you are oppressed in Ethiopia. A different set of standards exist for you because of our militaristic allegiance to one another in the pursuit of enacting justice against terrorism.

Seemingly, the US makes exceptions for our allies in the "Global War on Terror" and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is the golden child of these perks. In her recent article *Allegiance Rewarded: Ethiopia reaps U.S. aid by enlisting in war on terror and hiring influential lobbyists*, Marina Walker Guevara shows that:

In its latest human rights report for 2006, the U.S. State Department painted a grim picture of the Ethiopian government's human rights record, one that has changed little over the years... Nevertheless, Ethiopia received a huge increase in military assistance from the United States in the three years after 9/11 — from \$928,000 in the period 1999-2001 to \$16.7 million between 2002 and 2004. In fact, in 2005 — a year of contested Ethiopian parliamentary elections when government forces detained, beat and killed opposition members, journalists and intellectuals — Ethiopia received \$7 million in Foreign Military Financing funding, an amount nearly equal to the FMF total from the previous two years combined.

...thanks to a concerted lobbying effort on behalf of the Ethiopian government and objections from the State Department, supporters of the Ethiopian government managed to stop a bill in Congress that would have cut off security assistance on human rights grounds.

And lobby they did to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars. DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary (#3712) by regulation has disclosed that they have a \$50K a-month contract to provide legislative, regulatory and public relations services to the government of Ethiopia. There are figures suggesting that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi previously spent upwards to \$600,000 with DLA Piper to persuade then Congressman Dennis Hastert to deny H.R.5680 (the previous incarnation of H.R.2003) the chance to make it to the floor of the House of Representatives. It worked.

The spending doesn't stop there, though. In a Justice Department report for the six months ending June 30, 2006, (mandated under the Foreign Agents Registration Act) in addition to DLA Piper the following organizations also represented Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in the halls of Congress:

- Hunton & Williams, LLP (#5627) representing the government of Ethiopia for legal and other services/lobbying on various matters and various aspects of its dispute with Eritrea for which they earned **\$818,722.39** for the six month period ending June 30, 2006. Their finances were reported as **\$485,918.50** for the six month period ending December 31, 2005 and **\$800,000.00** for the six month period ending June 30, 2005.
- McGuireWoods Consulting, LLC (#5408) representing the government of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia as a U.S. Policy Consultant to provide advice on U.S.-Ethiopian relations and arranged meetings with members of Congress and congressional staff to promote and strengthen Ethiopia's relations with the United States. The registrant also prepared informational materials on issues relating to the Ethiopian elections and relations with Eritrea. They earned **\$66,000.00** for the six month period ending February 28, 2006.
- Scribe Strategies & Advisors (#5673) representing the Embassy of Ethiopia in public relations agreed to provide strategic counsel, government affairs and related public relations and communication services to promote and to protect Ethiopia's strategic relations with the United States. The registrant may meet with Administration officials, members of Congress, and congressional staffers in order to exchange information and educational materials regarding the bilateral relationship with Ethiopia and to assist in bringing U.S.-Ethiopian interests together. Finances: None Reported.

No one is denying Prime Minister Meles Zenawi the opportunity to utilize lobbyists. It is just hard to reconcile the fact that while the US is sending financial assistance his way, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is racking up quite a tab on K Street.

In the year and a half after the contested 2005 elections, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi spent over \$2 million dollars with Hunton & Williams, LLP, alone. The semi-annual reports for the last half of 2006 and the first half of 2007 have yet to be released. If trends prove true, it is likely Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's recent spending on lobbyists will dwarf the numbers from these older reports.

So there you have it... we not only reward our allies regardless of ruthless, abusive and lawless policies they enact, but we expand our military spending with them and shield them from sensible legislation.

In a November of 2005 Op/Ed piece citing data from the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, Dr. Fisseha Teclé suggests:

The Prime Minister is telling Western donors that he and his group alone can fight terrorism and maintain stability – hence their need to stay in power indefinitely... Staying in power has meant violent repression of the domestic opposition. The Western world has apparently acquiesced to this arrangement.

And now, after repeated and continuous abuses documented over the past year and a half later, he reminds us, yet again, that the US administration looks past these accounts:

...the administration and the Pentagon hold the shortsighted view that a repressive Zenawi is their best bet given the so-called war on terror.

Writing about this issue in an open letter earlier this year from her "cell" in the Kaliti prison, prisoner of conscience (and now hostage) Judge Birtukan Mideksa notes that:

... the United States may favor order over justice in this region as long as the war on terror is on course. The pragmatic choice might be occasionally holding your nose when the government of the region's biggest power committed human rights abuses. But order wouldn't be served when the government turned into alienating and disfranchising a big chunk of its population.

Chances are Prime Minister Meles Zenawi (along with the current US administration) fancies himself "the victorious-against-terrorists United States friend," as stated by Terrence Lyons, a George Mason University scholar interviewed in Marina Walker Guevara's exposé. Lyons continues, "He is not worried if the [U.S.] ambassador says we are concerned about prison conditions. He would just laugh at us."

Indeed he would. Indeed he has.... for the moment. The problem of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi grows worse every day and the tipping point is near. Publicly shunned by old allies, world leaders, ex-world leaders, and members of his inner circle, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has proven himself to be incompetent and unreliable.

In terms of a militarily ally, is this the man we really want on our side when the chips are down and the stakes are high? He's cracking right now under his own mismanagement. Is this the man we really want on our side to cover our bases and cover our backs? He would/will stab us in the back when it suits him. He is a loose cannon and is likely endangering our own troops in the region. He has certainly endangered the mission and exploited the opportunity and the infrastructure the US Military has put in place. We are endangering ourselves by propping up the Prime Minister.

Herein, is the real hope for a productive and amicable future between Ethiopia and the US. Herein is the roadmap for developing trusted allies. Herein is the framework for honoring human rights and the rule of law. From the same letter quoted above, Judge Birtukan Mideksa states:

... a long term solution for the country's political problem will only be furnished when the government starts an honest dialogue with all Ethiopian political forces, inside and outside of the country.

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is not going to set our public agenda and Congress will continue to champion legislation that is meant to "encourage and facilitate the consolidation of peace and security, respect for human rights, democracy, and economic freedom in Ethiopia." We stand squarely and wholeheartedly behind Rep. Donald Payne and Rep. Christopher Smith for their undeterred action on this very important cause. We thank Rep. Earl Blumenauer, Rep. Corrine Brown, Rep. Michael Capuano, Rep. William Clay, Rep. Michael Honda, Rep. Tom Lantos, Rep. Daniel Lungren, Rep. James Moran, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, Rep. Janice Schakowsky, Rep. Diane Watson, Rep. Lynn Woolsey and Rep. David Wu for their stand on these issues, too.

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi may think he has a bit of political capital with the US right now, but what he really has is chump change.

Yours in solidarity through our shared effort to restore human rights,

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