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Ethiopian People's Congress for United Struggle (Shengo)

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June 22, 2015

To: President Barack Obama, President of the United States

Mr. John Kerry, Secretary of State, United States of America

From: Ethiopian People's Congress for United Struggle (SHENGO)

Subject: President Barack Obama's Visit to Ethiopia

"If the dignity of the individual is upheld across Africa, then I believe Americans will be more free as well, because I believe that none of us are fully free when others in the human family remain shackled by poverty or disease or oppression...Governments that respect the rights of their citizens and abide by the rule of law do better, grow faster."

President Obama, South Africa, June 30, 2013

Dear Mr. President,

The Ethiopian People's Congress for United Struggle (SHENGO) wishes to express deep concern about your decision to visit Ethiopia at a time when the vast majority of Ethiopia's 100 million people live in an environment of fear, repression, dejection and exclusion by their own government and chronic poverty. The plethora of evidence on the ground shows unequivocally that civil society, independent media and political competition and the chance to set up private businesses and to gain employment on merit have been thwarted by a narrow band of ethnic elites that has captured the state and the national economy. The U.S. Department of State and numerous human rights organizations offer evidence of unprecedented and persistent human rights violations including summary executions and jailing of political leaders and members, the abrogation of the rule of law, the undermining of public trust in their government institutions and public officials. By your own definition, the Ethiopian government is not one that respects the "dignity of individual citizens or respects the rights of its citizens or abides by the rule of law," values that you echo in public.

SHENGO recognizes the fact that in a region dotted by failed and failing states, internal displacement of millions, unabated migration and human trafficking, endemic poverty and hopelessness, civil conflict and terrorism, the government of the United States considers the Ethiopian government as a reliable ally and friend in the war against terrorism. History teaches

us that, regardless of the government in power in either country, U.S. and Ethiopian relations span more than 100 years and will endure for generations to come. We are therefore skeptical that, in the long term, the Ethiopian government that suppresses and oppresses its own citizens under the pretext of Anti-terrorism will serve as a bastion of stability by providing the institutional and policy basis for sustainable and equitable growth for Ethiopia's millions.

Mr. President,

While Africans, including Ethiopians welcome America's engagement, especially in the advancement of human rights, the rule of law and democracy and in building prosperous societies, we are concerned that your proposed visit to Ethiopia is most likely to do the opposite. It will embolden the single party state that uses Anti-Terrorism and Charities and Societies Proclamations to punish all forms of dissent. Andrew Beatty of AFP put the risks your visit entails succinctly in his comment on June 20, 2015. "U.S. President Barack Obama will in late July become the first sitting American leader to visit Ethiopia and the Headquarters of the African Union" where he plans to "meet with Ethiopian government and AU leaders." As you know, the African Union is the only organization that served the Ethiopian government by sending an observation team to a make-believe Parliamentary Election best described as a "sham" and a non-event. For this reason and as noted by Mr. Beatty, "human rights groups have questioned the visit to Kenya, but are also asking why Obama is visiting Ethiopia so soon after a contested," and we add, flawed "election in which the ruling party won 100 percent of the votes" in succession.

Ethiopia's case is reminiscent of the old Soviet system; and your visit will be taken as an approval that the single party state is acceptable to the U.S. as long as it serves as the "policeman" in the Horn of Africa. We do not believe that you want generations of Ethiopians to remember you as the leader of the "free world" who gave a stamp of approval to a dictatorship that maims, murders, jails and forces to flee all those who stand for freedom, justice, the rule of law and democracy and is unrepentant in compromising Ethiopia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Mr. President,

Equally, SHENGO shares views expressed by Jeffrey Smith of the Robert Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights who said, "The decision by President Obama to travel to Ethiopia, which has seen three opposition party members murdered this week alone, is very troubling and inconsistent with American values of respect for human rights, civil society, political pluralism and democracy." We should like to add that over the past few weeks alone the ruling party has hunted down and jailed 45 leaders and members of the All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP) and is said to have murdered an unknown number of political and human rights activists. Accordingly, your visit to Ethiopia sends the wrong signal that the Government of the United States chooses to stand more firmly on the side of African dictators rather than on the side of those who advance

freedom, respect for human and civil rights, the rule of law and ultimately democracy. In the long run, only the emergence of a just, all inclusive, democratic and prosperous Ethiopia will serve as a beacon of stability, unity in diversity, Anti-terrorism and a symbol of good governance in the Horn of Africa. Sadly, your visit reinforces the perception among the vast majority of Ethiopia's 100 million citizens that their quest for freedom, respect for human rights, national sovereignty, inclusion and genuine democracy is secondary to America's short-term interests of fighting against and containing terrorism. This is the reason why we urge you to reconsider your visit. If your visit takes place as proposed, there is very little doubt that the Ethiopia's Orwellian, Surveillance and corrupt State--that spies on its citizens at home and abroad using a 5 to 1 spy network---will assume the visit as a vindication and endorsement of legitimacy and use this as a license to repress and punish with impunity.

Mr. President,

In April this year, our organization joined renowned Human Rights organizations, Ethiopian-Americans and others and expressed our outrage concerning wrongful utterances and declarations conveyed by Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman who gave a stamp of approval to one of the most oppressive governments on the planet during an official visit to Addis Ababa, April 16, 2015. Her statement that "Ethiopia is a democracy that is moving forward in an election that we expect to be free, fair, credible, open and inclusive in ways that Ethiopia has moved forward in strengthening its democracy" is utterly baseless, untrue, demeaning to Ethiopians and harmful to America's long-term interests. As we predicted, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the minority ethnic group that dominates the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and in power since 1991, run against itself and declared that it won 442 of 547 Parliamentary seats in a cycle of sham elections boycotted by 30 opposition parties and deliberate dismantlement of others. We have no doubt the remaining seats whose strategic purpose is to appease the donor and diplomatic community will be allocated on the basis of ethnic and party loyalty.

In response to Ms. Sherman's incredible statements, human rights groups such as Amnesty International, U.S.A, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, Freedom Now, Ethiopian Human Rights Project and International Rivers co-signed and sent a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry on April 17, 2015. "We are deeply troubled over the comments made by Under Secretary Wendy Sherman yesterday in Addis Ababa. The Under Secretary's unfortunate statement calling Ethiopia a democracy puts the United States government on record as endorsing a government that systematically suppresses the fundamental rights of its citizens. Political pluralism and the ability of Ethiopians to freely express themselves, associate, and participate in peaceful assembly is far more restricted today than ten years ago under the same government, reflecting a dramatic deterioration in the government's respect for fundamental civil and political rights. Since 2005, the ruling party's dominance of the political landscape, repression of political opposition parties and restrictions on media and civil society have only increased. Under Secretary Sherman's comments are baffling to any observer of

developments in Ethiopia and contradict the assessments of human rights organizations and even other governments. Her statements also undermine the courageous work of those pushing for a freer Ethiopia, many of whom are now imprisoned for exercising their fundamental human rights.” Your visit reinforces the perception that human rights, the rule of law and democracy are secondary in the execution of America’s foreign policy not only in Ethiopia but also the rest of Africa. At the same time, we take your word that you are committed to free and independent media and to the critical role of civil society in building democratic institutions. Allow us to flag the fact that the Ethiopian government is committed to a rigid and defiant policy that, regardless of global outcry, free and independent media and civil society won’t happen under its watch. This places your leadership in an awkward position.

On April 21, 2015, CPJ reported that “Eritrea and Ethiopia are the most censored nations in the world.” Last year, CPJ reported “A state crackdown on independent publications and bloggers in Ethiopia this year more than doubled the number of journalists imprisoned to 17, from seven the previous year, and prompted several journalists to flee into exile.” In 2014, the U.S. Department of State reported that Ethiopia is a source and destination for men, women and children “subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking.” Ethiopian girls as young as 8 years of age are subjected to “domestic servitude throughout the Middle East, as well as in the Sudan and South Sudan.” This and other reports indicate that “The central market in Addis Ababa is home to the largest collection of brothels in Africa.”

Mr. President,

You will agree with us that no country will prosper if its youth is subjected to repression and oppression, to lack of opportunities at home and to under-reported instability. The vast majority of Ethiopians, many born after the current government took power in 1991, are robbed of their dignity in two ways: they are not free to demand justice or to find employment at home; and they face uncertain and degrading conditions when they leave their homes in search of opportunities abroad. The beheading and wholesale massacre of 30 Ethiopian Christians by ISIS/Libya because of their faith and nationality attests to debilitating poverty and repression at home. Petrol bombing of Ethiopians and other killings in South Africa reinforce the primary reason why they are compelled to leave Ethiopia in the first place. According to Yemeni government sources and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) one million Ethiopian refugees are trapped in war torn Yemen. Many have been killed and a large number have been wounded. In November 2013, the Government of Saudi Arabia expelled 163,000 Ethiopians. Clearly huge aid has done little and will do little to accommodate the needs of the poor. This is among the numerous bad governance reasons why millions of Ethiopians fear their leaders and question the legitimacy of their own government accusing it that it is hopelessly corrupt and does not defend their rights and denies them freedom, justice and opportunities. The government’s response to protests and dissent is to murder selectively, arrest, jail and evict citizens. As the Department of State documents year after year, the Ethiopian government considers any peaceful dissent, criticism of the government and protest for justice and accountability, the rule of law and democracy as a

form of “terrorism.” Ethiopia has one of the highest populations of political prisoners in the world.

Mr. President,

Ethiopians “are shackled by debilitating poverty “and mal-distribution of incomes and wealth as well as by draconian laws that keep them trapped. There is no single independent institution left to speak on their behalf. In “**Journalism is not a crime**” January 22, 2015, Human Rights Watch had reported as follows. “The Ethiopian government’s systematic repression of independent media has created a bleak landscape for free expression ahead of the May 2015 general elections. In the past year, six privately owned publications closed after government harassment; at least 22 journalists, bloggers and publishers were criminally charged, and more than 30 journalists fled the country in fear of being arrested under repressive laws.” This is the reason why independent media and civil society did not play any role in the May elections. Large amounts of money from aid, remittances and export earnings are stolen and taken out of the country each year; and there is no single institution to expose the bleeding. You will agree with us that sustainable and equitable development will not be attainable if the bleeding from corruption and illicit outflow continues and if political reform does not take place soon.

The U.S. Department of State “criticized the Ethiopian high court’s decision in January this year to proceed with the trial of journalists and Bloggers saying that it “undermines a free and open media environment.” Their case illustrates the enormous hurdles the new generation of Ethiopians face in demanding respect for their rights and freedoms that the U.S. and other Western democracies say are essential in lifting people out of poverty and oppression. The Ethiopian government continues to refuse to practice provisions of human rights contained in its own constitution. “Ethiopia is a multi-party democracy on paper” only. Having “won 100 percent of the votes” again, the ruling party will dominate parliament for the next five years. The façade of “free, fair and credible” last May did absolutely nothing to change single party preponderance and to move the country towards genuine democracy.

Mr. President,

You had said over and over again during your visits to Africa, North Africa and Asia that the United States is committed to the fundamental principle that advancement of human freedom enshrined in the rule of law is critical for durable peace, stability, sustainable and equitable development; and that free, independent and prosperous people are more likely to defend themselves and their countries against terrorism than people who are oppressed and marginalized by their own governments. We agree with these principles. However, Ethiopia’s federal police and judicial system is heavily politicized. The party and its endowments, a selected few individuals and the state dominate the national economy. The World Economic Forum rated Ethiopia 2.7 out of “a best possible score of 7” of its judicial system. This rating converges with other low scores including Freedom House’s latest rating of Ethiopia as among the “least free in

the world.” The Ethiopian government dismisses these ratings as unacceptable. “The Ethiopian government has rejected criticism from Western governments, including the Department of State and human rights groups about the handling of the Bloggers” and other cases including massive displacements of indigenous people from their ancestral lands. We feel strongly that exclusion on the basis of ethnicity, religion and political affiliation and massive displacement of citizens from their lands contribute to instability, civil unrest and terrorism. Criminalization of independent media and civil society is detrimental to Ethiopia’s democratization. The crowding out of Ethiopia’s nascent private sector diminishes productivity and increased employment. These are real.

Mr. President,

Close to your heart, we feel deeply that the criminalization of freedom of the press, civil society and political pluralism is against the long-term interests of the Ethiopian and American people and should not be given a stamp of approval for short term gains. Our organization reiterates in the strongest terms possible that it recognizes, acknowledges and supports the notion that terrorism in the Horn of Africa poses an existential threat to countries in the region, the U.S. and the World; and should be stopped. We respectfully disagree that the way to deter terrorism is by a governing elite and state machinery that is bolstered by massive foreign aid to terrorize innocent people. It is tragic for us to witness this unexpected and dangerous convergence between a self-serving ethnic elite and globalization.

Mr. President,

As a President who cares deeply about the wellbeing of young people, especially girls, we wish to flag to you the plight of young people who face a dim future in their country and continue to leave in droves. This condition is facilitated by degrading human trafficking enterprises with government license and by illegal traffickers that sustain unprecedented level of human exodus of young girls and boys who leave Ethiopia at a rate unheard of in the country’s history. The Ethiopian government estimates that each day 1,500 young Ethiopians leave the country legally and another 3,500 through human smuggling. The mathematics of this many young people fleeing from Ethiopia depicts poor, exclusionary and oppressive governance. Clearly, the benefits of Ethiopia’s growth have not been distributed fairly and justly. We can tell you with full confidence that Ethiopia’s youth see no hope in their own country’s future where a few elites at the top amass incomes and wealth that is best described as shameful and slanderous. The government of Ethiopia has done practically nothing to address this social crisis. By comparison, all countries that are genuine democracies make every effort to meet the aspirations and hopes of their people. They create jobs and other opportunities so that the country does not hemorrhage from the loss of its human capital. Don’t you agree with us that Ethiopia’s youth deserve to know your views and America’s commitment to sustainable and equitable growth whose social anchor are Ethiopia’s citizens, especially its youth?

Mr. President,

SHENGO wishes to highlight the fundamental and enduring principle that relations between the American and Ethiopian people span more than 100 years; and will endure for hundreds of years regardless of regime change. Accordingly, we urge you as leader and the government of the United States to stand firm on the side of the Ethiopian people by being more forthcoming on the need to respect freedom and human rights, justice, equality, the rule of law and democracy for all of the Ethiopian people. We feel strongly that America's enduring contribution to Ethiopia and the rest of Africa is not to give aid that is most often stolen or wasted or to support and bankroll self-serving elites and dictators who provide services for money and serve short term interests. Rather, it is to demonstrate unbridled commitment in promoting America's core values of good governance, the rule of law, equitable access to social and economic opportunities, advancement of civil society, independent and free media and political pluralism. In this connection, we urge you to use America's enormous leverage and consider the following specific areas of opportunity for reform and action by the Ethiopian government:

1. Immediate release of political prisoners, journalists and Bloggers.
2. Rescind the draconian Anti-Terrorism and CSO Proclamations and
3. Condition future U.S. intelligence, military, humanitarian and development assistance to Ethiopian government commitment to respect human rights, political, civil and religious freedom and free and independent media, the rule of law and democratization.

We are confident that when free from repression and oppression by their own government, the people of Ethiopia will do all in their power to defend themselves against terrorism.

We thank you for your understanding and attention to this urgent matter.

Respectfully



Taye Zegeye, PhD

Chairperson