



Submission No 20

**Review of Australia's Relationship with the
Countries of Africa**

Name: Dr Elsabet Tamrat PhD

Organisation: The Ethiopian-Australian Advocacy Committee



Submission No:.....	20
Date Received:	11/12/09
Secretary:	

Senator Michael Forshaw – Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Re: Inquiry into Australia’s Relationship with the Countries of Africa

9 December 2009

Dear Senator Forshaw,

I am writing on behalf of the Ethiopian-Australian Advocacy Committee that is operating under the umbrella of the Ethiopian Community Association Council in Australia, a non-profit organization that is committed to assisting Ethiopians who reside in Australia and in the homeland. This letter intends to highlight the need of good governance in Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular.

Ethiopia is a federal republic governed by Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition. Its population is believed to be approximately 80 million and, as such, it is the second highest in Africa. Ethiopia is also a country with an ancient civilisation and proud history that includes Africa’s unprecedented successful resistance to colonisation. Its natural and human potential resources are vast and, according to The Economist, its economy is now growing rapidly.

In the 2005 parliamentary elections, the EPRDF won a third consecutive five-year term and following the election, foreign election observers concluded that the election had been rigged. Opposition supporters took to the streets, and an estimated 30,000 people were arrested and nearly 200 were killed in the unrest that followed.

According to Human rights report it has become a common knowledge and daily occurrences that:
“...Citizens’ right to change their government in local and by-elections [are not respected]; unlawful killings, torture, beating, abuse, and mistreatment of detainees and opposition supporters by security forces, usually with impunity; poor prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention, particularly of suspected sympathizers or members of opposition or insurgent groups; police and judicial corruption; detention without charge and lengthy pretrial detention; infringement on citizens' privacy rights including illegal searches; use of excessive force by security services in an internal conflict and counterinsurgency operations; restrictions on freedom of the press; arrest, detention, and harassment of journalists; restrictions on freedom of assembly and association; violence and societal discrimination against women and abuse of children; female genital mutilation (FGM); exploitation of children for economic and sexual purposes; trafficking in persons; societal discrimination against persons with disabilities and religious and ethnic minorities; and government interference in union activities, including harassment of union leaders---.” (Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2008)

Amnesty International also concurred with the human rights report when it said:

“Nearly a million people in Ethiopia’s drought-afflicted Somali Region in the east suffered severe food shortages due to a government blockade on humanitarian supplies and food trade---. Government forces were responsible for mass arrests, torture, rape and extrajudicial executions in a continuing conflict with an armed group. Thousands of government opponents were detained without trial. Leaders of the political opposition, journalists and human rights defenders, who were prisoners of conscience, were convicted and jailed.”

(Amnesty International Report, 2008)

International aid agency Oxfam on 22 October 2009 called for a radical shake-up in the way the world deals with food crises in Ethiopia and beyond. The agency concentrated on what it called as “knee-jerk reaction” to food crises that is dominated by sending food aid. While the agency recognised that sending food aid does save lives, the dominance of this approach fails to offer long-term solutions that would break these cyclical and chronic crises.

In a report, “Band Aids and Beyond”, published on the above mentioned day, to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the Ethiopia famine, Oxfam says international donors need to adopt a new approach to humanitarian disasters which focuses on preparing communities to prevent and deal with disasters such as drought before they strike, rather than relying mainly on short-term emergency relief, such as imported food aid.

Twenty-five years ago Ethiopia was struck by one of the worst famines in its history. An estimated one million people died and millions more suffered from extreme hunger and malnutrition. Today, millions in Ethiopia and across East Africa are facing severe food and water shortages after years of poor rains. It is estimated that drought costs Ethiopia \$1.1 billion a year – almost eclipsing the total annual overseas assistance to the country.

Currently, 70 per cent of humanitarian aid to Ethiopia comes from the United States. Out of the \$3.2 billion of US humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia since 1991, 94% has been in the form of food aid, Penny Lawrence, International Director for Oxfam, who has just returned from visiting Oxfam projects in Ethiopia, said:

“We cannot make the rains come, but there is much more that we can do to break the cycle of drought driven disaster in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Food aid offers temporary relief and has kept people alive in countless situations, but does not tackle the underlying causes that continue to make people vulnerable to disaster year-after-year. Donors need to shift their approach, and help to give communities the tools to tackle disasters before they strike. Drought does not need to mean hunger and destitution. If communities have irrigation for crops, grain stores, and wells to harvest rains then they can survive despite what the elements throw at them.”

We, as a committee, believe that providing assistance, including food aid, when disaster occurs is not a long term solution for a poor nation like Ethiopia and other African countries. **In order to achieve a long term solution to the problem, donor nations, including Australia, need to provide the know-how of good governance including technical and material assistance that enable the people to be self reliant and solve the problem by themselves.**

Many international government and human rights organisations are aware of the acute problems facing both Ethiopia and other African countries in terms of shortage of food, lack of good governance, freedom of speech, the rule of law and the right to work and live in peace in their own country. As sample evidence, with this submission, we attach copies of

1. A letter by US senators Feingold, Isakson, Leahy and Durbin addressed to the Ethiopian Prime Minister that expresses concern about ongoing civil rights abuses in Ethiopia.
2. A copy of a Human Rights Watch 2009 report documenting a very recent history of political repression in Ethiopia.
3. A copy of 2008 Amnesty International report on Ethiopia.

We would appreciate it if you could consider the above mentioned suggestions and help prevent the vicious cycle of shortage of food recurring in Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular by encouraging the Australian government to support programs that lead to reductions in corruption and better governance.

Respectfully submitted

Elsabet Tamrat, PhD

Chair, Ethiopian-Australian Advocacy Committee

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 16, 2008

His Excellency Meles Zenawi
Prime Minister, Ethiopia
c/o Embassy of Ethiopia
506 International Drive, NW
Washington, DC 20008

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

We write to express our concern about several recent developments in your country, which we fear could make the important partnership between the United States and Ethiopia more difficult. We are deeply troubled that these events together appear to indicate an erosion of political freedom and the rule of law in Ethiopia.

First, we are concerned by the re-arrest of Unity for Democracy and Justice Party leader Birtukan Midekssa and reports that her life sentence in prison has been reinstated. As you know, a political opposition with the right to freedom of speech, press and association is essential to any vibrant democracy. We worry that Birtukan's re-arrest signals your government's waning commitment to those democratic principles. This is a disappointing signal in advance of your country's elections next year, which we believe have great potential.

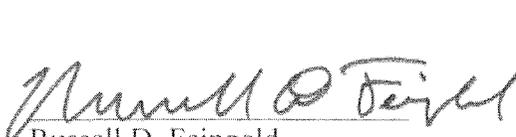
Second, we were disappointed to learn of the passage of your government's law restricting civil society groups receiving more than 10 percent of their funding from sources outside Ethiopia from doing any work related to human rights, gender equality, the rights of the disabled, children's rights or conflict resolution. While we respect your government's right to regulate non-governmental organizations operating within Ethiopia, we fear that as written, this law will undermine the important work done by many organizations in those respective fields. We hope you will ensure that the broad discretionary powers granted to the government by this law are not used as a political tool to impede the independence of civil society.

Third and finally, we are concerned by reports over the last year that several civil society leaders and traditional elders in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia have been detained for extended periods without charge and then tried without due process. Many of those arrested have reportedly been involved in important and much needed peace efforts in the region. We appreciate the fact that Ethiopia has legitimate security concerns in the Ogaden, but fear that this pattern of arrests, if true, risks exacerbating local grievances and contributing to radicalization rather

than effective counter-insurgency and stabilization. As you know, civil society is a critical partner in the work of building peace, and we urge you to work with it as much as possible.

We feel strongly about the importance of our countries' partnership and hope it will continue in the years ahead. That is why we are writing to you now to raise our concern about these troubling developments in your country that risk undermining democratic progress and the rule of law. If these trends persist, we believe they will have adverse impacts on our close relationship. We hope this is not the case and look forward to working together toward our shared goals of peace and prosperity.

Sincerely,

	
Russell D. Feingold Chairman Subcommittee on African Affairs Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate	Johnny Isakson Ranking Member Subcommittee on African Affairs Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate

	
Patrick J. Leahy Chairman State & Foreign Ops Subcommittee Committee on Appropriations United States Senate	Richard J. Durbin Chairman Human Rights & the Law Subcommittee Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate

CC: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice
U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia Donald Yamamoto