

PROJECT FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ETHIOPIAN LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

1. BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

It has become common place to say that Ethiopia, one of the least developed countries in the world was also until recently a country where a ruthless dictatorship and a protracted civil war were spreading havoc, famine and misery.

With regard to human rights, the government was among the few states that were regularly condemned by concerned international bodies for its "gross violation of human rights". In early 1985, a book by Charles Humana entitled "World Guide to Human Rights" had singled out Mengistu's Ethiopia as THE country in the world where the people's fundamental rights were least respected. While New Zealand and Denmark, with 96% came on top, Ethiopia with 17% found itself at the bottom of the list.

During all these years, repression in government-controlled areas and serious human rights abuses from both sides in war zones brought untold suffering to our people.

Under the military dictatorship, the Ethiopian people were subjected to arbitrary arrests, detention without trial, mass killings and extrajudicial executions, expropriation of property without due process of law, torture and other inhuman and degrading treatment.

In areas of armed conflicts arrests and summary executions took a heavy toll on civilians who actually did not participate in the wars. Captured fighters of rebel fronts were executed "en masse" as the government did not recognize them as POWs. According to an Amnesty International publication (November 1991) imprisonment of dissidents, torture and killing of political opponents and assassination of alleged collaborators were also common in rebel-controlled areas.

As villages and towns were won and lost time and again by the contending forces, civilians were falling victim to mass arrest, torture and summary executions for alleged "collaboration" with the enemy. Insecurity in the war zones forced whole communities to flee localities and even the country itself. At one point the number of war and political refugees reached the staggering figure of nearly 2 million people- mainly peasants and their families who fled to neighboring countries of Sudan, Somalia, Kenya and Djibouti. This flight of able-bodied peasants, the insecurity which was not conducive to farming activities, the destruction of harvests together with natural calamities explain the grave economic crisis which culminated in the "famine of the century" of 1984/85 and the death of over one million peasants.

Our purpose is not to engage in a "check list" approach of human rights abuses in Ethiopia over the last two decades. Cold figures can serve as pointers to the gravity of the situation and the tragedies that our people went through during this period. But they leave out too much to be considered as anything other than one part of the tragedy. Not least because they do not help us assess the moral, social and material misery of millions of direct and indirect victims and the devastating consequences on the country's social fabric and values long shared and cherished by its people.

One important dimension of human rights violation in Ethiopia, the practical, moral and psychological implications of which were not well understood by foreign friends was the prohibition of any organized work in favour of human rights. There were no legal possibilities for expression of solidarity with needy victims nor for rendering moral and material support to them, let alone for defending them in court or denouncing these abuses publicly. An organization for defence of human rights was lacking in a country where the people needed it most.

The vigilant watch against any expression of solidarity based on political, ideological, religious and ethnic affinities was part and parcel of a global strategy in the dictatorship's struggle for survival. Moral and material support for victims even among family members and on purely humanitarian grounds was looked upon with great suspicion and actively discouraged. But the reasons for prohibition of organized solidarity went far beyond politics.

The regime wanted to introduce new "sets of values" which stressed division of society along exclusively political and ideological patterns. All other ties (family, friendship, regional, religious, ethnic ...) were supposed to give way to the new "values" which simply divided the country into "revolutionary" and "counter-revolutionary" elements according to where people stood in their attitude towards the dictatorship. Expression of oneness and solidarity "across the line" were actively discouraged.

The slogan "Nothing above the revolution" which was fashionable in the late '70s and early '80s was a direct result of this policy. A most blatant illustration of the devastating damage to elementary moral values and standards that resulted from this policy was the incredible attitude of some people during the infamous "red terror" campaign of 1978. At that time, mothers were forced to publicly unmask "crimes against the revolution" committed by their own children and to approve the summary executions which came as "just punishment" for those crimes. (Cf. The Red Terror Campaign in Ethiopia. Amnesty International. Index A.I. AFR. 25/04/78).

Such being the context, at that time any action in favour of respect of the most elementary human rights and any gesture of solidarity with the countless victims of the regime were not only a response to an obvious humanitarian challenge but also an integral part of the political, ideological and moral struggle

against totalitarianism. It had to be an underground endeavour with all the consequences that such "counter-revolutionary" activity could imply in what was a full-fledged police state. Several solidarity networks operated secretly in the country during the years of dictatorship. Political groups operated their own solidarity activities but paid a heavy tribute to their action as activists assigned to humanitarian work were hunted down and sometimes executed just as other political opponents. It is superfluous to add that open condemnation of all these abuses and action to raise public awareness on human rights issues was simply unthinkable.

The new political climate in the country, although extremely volatile, seems more favourable to human rights. But there can be no place for over-optimism. There is a need for extra vigilance.

Although at a reduced scale, armed clashes continue in some parts of the country. We do not think that these can be dismissed as insignificant and elementary phenomena inherent in all confused periods of transition. Over-emphasis on ethnicity can lead to further complications and undue exacerbation of relations between the country's numerous ethnic groups. This can in turn lead to intensification of armed conflicts with their too familiar lot of destruction and tragedy to our people.

Moreover, in spite of the adoption of a Human Rights Charter by the government and its declared adherence to the principles embodied in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, no constitutional, legal and practical measures to protect human rights have been introduced. Here again, the signs are disturbing to say the least. The present vague and precarious human rights situation in the country cannot be attributed to the problems of transitional periods. It has been more than a year now since thousands have been held without trial. Many thousands have fled the country. Thousands have been uprooted from Eritrea and deported to Tigray, Gondar, Addis Abeba for allegedly having collaborated with "Ethiopian colonialism". The national defence force is composed of people whose political, ideological and even ethnic allegiance is to one political group. Defence and security forces are not detached from party politics. All political groups do not have free and fair access to the mass media, etc.

In spite of this volatile military and political situation, there is a new chance for human rights. But if there is to be no return to the gross human rights abuses of the past, Ethiopians must mobilize to face the challenges created by the new situation: no more war. National reconciliation. Respect of the peoples' rights. Unity based on equality. Social justice and progress.

The accomplishment of these tremendous tasks which should lead to the triumph of the rule of law in a united and democratic Ethiopia will not be easy. For our part, we believe that none of these will be realized without full respect of individual liberties and the development of a spirit of solidarity which transcends political,

ideological, ethnic and religious affinities. We know that this will be an uphill struggle as we have first to overcome the sequels of decades of repression and humiliation. The rehabilitation of traditional moral and human values cherished by the people of Ethiopia and the popularization of broader values of individual liberties as embodied in various international and Pan African instruments will be best served by organized and concerted efforts of Ethiopian themselves.

These considerations have led us to the conviction that the creation of a human rights league is a most timely and urgent task.

The league is a humanitarian association of concerned Ethiopians dedicated to the promotion of human rights in Ethiopia and to contributing its share in the struggle for peace, democracy, national unity and reconciliation.

II. FUNDAMENTAL TASKS

In its struggle to contribute towards peaceful transition to a democratic and united Ethiopia and as an organization dedicated to consolidation of basic human rights in the country, the League will have to work in four complementary directions:

1. Defense of Human Rights

The struggle for the defence of human rights is part and parcel of the endeavour to restore and consolidate peace and democracy in our country. As a non-partisan humanitarian organization devoid of any political opinion or ideology, it will carefully monitor the human rights situation in the country and expose any and all abuses.

The struggle for respect of human rights in Ethiopia will first and foremost be one which should be waged to avoid repetition of past abuses. The League will constantly work towards banning of practices such as imprisonment of prisoners of conscience, arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial executions. If and when people are detained for political reasons the League will appeal for protection of these detainees and particularly the application of the "standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners" adopted by the First United Nations Congress on the prevention of crime and the treatment of prisoners and approved by the Economic and Social Council of 13 May 1977. It will demand that these people be brought to court and work for guarantees of a fair trial consistent with internationally recognized standards.

At the same time, the League will struggle for constitutionally guaranteed individual human rights including freedom of conscience, expression, association and peaceful assembly and all other liberties embodied in basic international and Pan African human rights instruments.

2. Struggle for Peace and Natural Reconciliation

Ethiopia's experience has clearly shown that armed conflicts are detrimental to democracy and individual rights. Unfortunately, more than a year after the demise of the Mengistu regime, total peace has not yet been restored in the country. The signs are that armed conflicts which have continued in many parts of the country will intensify as the country's political groups do not seem capable of solving Ethiopia's problems without resorting to arms. That is why the League will work for peace as a prerequisite for respect and consolidation of human rights in Ethiopia.

The League's urgent tasks during the transition period will therefore be to encourage all steps which will foster national unity and reconciliation and which will eventually lead to holding of free and fair elections. It will struggle for:

- Legislation and registration of all political parties and other associations irrespective of where they stand in their attitudes towards the provisional government;
- Establishment of an independent judiciary and mechanisms to allow for all political groups (including those opposed to the present or any future transitional government) to have free and fair access to the mass media;
- Prevention of party dominance and interference in governmental-administrative affairs;
- Vigilant watch against any extrajudicial execution of political prisoners or captured combatants or civilians in conflict areas;
- Fair trial for officials of former regime;
- Detachment of the armed forces from party politics and specially an end to political, ideological, ethnic and/or regional allegiance of the country's defence and security forces;
- The setting up of an independent election commission.

At the same time, the League will fight all obstacles on the path to democracy, national reconciliation and democratic unity of the people of Ethiopia.

With this regard, the League's main concern will be to struggle against any and all attempts which may interfere with Ethiopia's march towards peace and reconciliation and its people's desire to live in harmony and brotherhood. To this end, it will:

1. Oppose any political or other group which attempts to capitalize on exaggerated and superficially over-perceived antagonisms between ethnic and or religious groups and all abuses of the nationality question by unscrupulous politicians as an instrument in the raging struggle for power;
2. Oppose violence of any kind including intimidation of actual or perceived opponents and work to foster a culture of decent and peaceful political competition;

3. Solidarity with victims of human rights abuses

This is another important task which the League will undertake. As was indicated earlier, the prohibition of solidarity work with victims of repression was one important dimension of the deplorable state of human rights. This had put society's moral values to an acid test, and victims and their families had been left on their own in their solitary struggle for survival. Materially destitute, morally humiliated and bitter, hundreds of thousand have lost confidence both in themselves and in society. The long-term negative effects of this phenomenon are very difficult to assess. But the League feels that it is not too late to repair some of the damages of the past and specially to embark on a policy of moral and material support and other solidarity with all victims of human rights abuses.

4. Public awareness campaign

We believe that nothing worthwhile will be achieved in the field of human rights without the participation of the people and the determination of citizens to defend, not only their own rights, but those of others. At present we observe a certain apathy of citizens not least because the horrible memories of the recent past are fresh in people's minds and the continuing conflicts between government and opposition forces. There are still reservations concerning the latter's democratic credentials which are yet to be established. To this must be added the absence of a credible organization capable of taking the lead in the struggle for human rights.

In this respect, the creation of a strong League which will set an example by defending the fundamental rights of the people detached enough from party and partisan politics to defend ALL victims and courageous enough to expose abuses whatever the authority or group which commits them will by itself represent a tremendous step forward. The momentum thus launched will have to be followed by a vigorous and systematic campaign to rehabilitate traditional values undermined by the ousted dictatorship and to acquaint the people with broader human rights issues and basic international and Pan African conventions.

III. STRUCTURE AND MANAGEMENT

The League's activities will be conducted by a board of directors composed of the League's president and the four department heads. The tasks of the president and the four department heads and details concerning support staff are outlined as follows.

1. The president of the League, as chairman of the board of directors will be responsible for the overall management of the League's activities, coordination of the various departments and will supervise and lead the day-to-day activities of the support staff.

2. Defence of human rights department. The main task of the department head will be to monitor the human rights situation in the country. Together with three assistants who will travel in all parts of the country, he will conduct research and gather information concerning the human rights situation in the country. He will consult with concerned government authorities or groups on the basis of the League's findings and will petition the government authorities or groups for redress when human rights are violated. Through the appropriate department heads he will expose human rights violations to the Ethiopian people and the international community. He will propose steps to be initiated by the League aimed at removing obstacles to the instauration of peace and democracy in the country and enhancing the spirit of brotherhood among the people of Ethiopia. He will submit annual reports on the general human rights situation.

3. Solidarity department. In case of arbitrary arrest or detention of a citizen, the solidarity department head will first contact the appropriate government authorities to see to it that the League's lawyers have access to the detainee and verify observance of the terms of the international convention on the treatment of prisoners, to push for a rapid and fair trial and if necessary to provide legal assistance. Where the need arises and the League's capacity permits, the department will provide financial and material support to the most destitute among victims of human rights abuses and/or their families. If and when resources allow, the department will run a post-prison care programme which will assist and orient people released from prison and needing support. The department will conduct a feasibility study on possibilities for the creation of small self-help, income-generating projects both to allow for rehabilitation of victims by providing employment and to provide finance for the League's solidarity activities.

3. Public awareness campaign department

This department will be responsible for the introduction of the basic principles on human rights and acquainting the general public of the prevailing human right situation in the country. In the first year following its creation, it will translate the following documents:

- a) The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 10 December 1948;
- b) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 16 December 1966;
- c) Protection of persons subjected to detention or imprisonment; standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners adopted by the First United Nations Congress on the prevention of crime and the treatment of prisoners on 13 May 1977;

d) Declaration on the protection of all persons from being subjected to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 9 December 1975;

e) The Pan African Charter on human and peoples' rights adopted at the summit of OAU May 1981;

f) Convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 10 December 1984;

4. International relations department. The above tasks that await the League will best be accomplished with the support and solidarity of concerned foreign organizations, governments and friends of Ethiopia. It will thus seek membership to some international human rights organizations and cooperate with human rights groups in Africa which are emerging as a result of the process of democratization now unfolding in the continent.

The department will publish "The Ethiopian Human Rights Monitor" twice a year in order to acquaint the international community with the situation in Ethiopia.

Cost estimates for the first year including
purchase of office material
(in Ethiopian BIRR)

1. Salary		
1 Executive director	1,200 x 12	14,000
4 Department heads	900 x 12	42,200
2 secretaries	450 x 12	10,800
1 Publications officer	500 x 12	6,000
1 documentalist	500 x 12	6,000
3 research assistants	500 x 12 x 3	18,000
1 accountant	500 x 12	6,000
Subtotal		104,400
2. Premises and equipment		
House rent	700 x 12	8,400
Photocopy machine (1)		12,000
Duplicator (1)		21,500
2 word processors GEEZ and Latin alphabets (1)		13,000
Fax machine (1)		5,000
Other office materials (tables, chairs, telephone, etc.)		9,000
Subtotal		68,500
3. Defense of human rights department		
Research and documentation including cost of trips to provinces (annual lump sum)		20,000
3 tape recorders, 3 cameras, films and tapes		7,000
4. Solidarity department		
Financial and material support to victims (2)		40,000
Post prison care programme		20,000
5. Public awareness campaign department		
Publication and distribution of 6 documents (3)		42,000
"Ethiopian Human Rights Monitor" twice yearly in English (3)		15,000
Quarterly journal in Amharic (3)		25,000
Organization of public meetings and workshops		10,000
Publication of statements, petitions, etc. (3)		10,000
6. International department (annual lump sum)		10,000
Sub-total		199,000
TOTAL		371,900
Contingency		28,100
GRAND TOTAL		400,000

- (1) Cost includes transportation and handling from Europe.
 (2) Rough estimates of money hand-outs to victims' families and legal assistance.
 (3) Includes costs of distribution.