

Tegbar

Ethiopian Democratic Action League
A worldwide Ethiopian civic association

January 18, 2006

Ms. Deborah Howell
Washington Post ombudsman
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Dear Ms. Deborah Howell,

In your articles on Ethiopia, we strongly urge you to focus on issues that would matter to the American public.

We are both very surprised as well as very disturbed by the silence of the Washington Post regarding the escalating government violence and political oppression in Ethiopia, which carries with it not only human costs and arrested development for the Ethiopian people, but raises concerns for American security if instability is to increase in this large country within the volatile Horn of Africa region. We are particularly troubled by this silence in light of the flurry of articles appearing in the Post in the past few weeks on frivolous and trivial topics related to Ethiopia.

You must be aware of the fact that, just within the last few months, the Ethiopian regime has killed several hundred innocent civilians including women and children. It has arrested and charged the leaders of the main opposition party, as well as journalists, pro-democracy activists, and human rights defenders with treason and genocide. But these people's only "crime" was to raise serious questions about, and protest, the fairness of recent elections in May, and about the government's political conduct.ⁱ Among the victims of the government's fabricated charges are some two-dozen individuals living in the US, several of them American citizens. For example, the Ethiopian regime included in its bizarre list of those charged in absentia with treason and genocide five journalists who live in the US and work for the U.S. government-owned broadcast agency, Voice of America.ⁱⁱ To date, several thousands of youths who were rounded up from the streets of Addis Abeba and other towns remain stashed away in malaria infested detention camps, to which independent and foreign media are not allowed any access.ⁱⁱⁱ

In response to these atrocities, human rights groups, the European Union and the US have demanded that the Ethiopian government uphold the rule of law and release political prisoners, unfortunately so far in vain. Subsequently, the donor community decided to freeze over \$375 million in aid that would otherwise be funneled into the regime's public budget.^{iv} The government of Ethiopia remains utterly undeterred. Instead, as Human Rights Watch states, it has drastically scaled up its suppression of any form of even the mildest protest, continuing to arrest and beat suspected opposition supporters: "The government is deepening its crackdown in Ethiopia's rural areas, far from the eyes and ears of international observers in Addis Ababa".^v

Dear Ms. Deborah Howell,

We strongly believe that the American people have a stake in stability, democracy and human rights in Ethiopia, and decent living standards for its people. And this is exactly why over \$600 million of

American tax payers' money is given to the Ethiopian government in the form of aid every year.^{vi} Yet, the dire human rights situation in Ethiopia remains largely unreported by the American media, including the Washington Post. This, despite the fact that Ethiopia, the largest African state second only to Nigeria, and arguably strategically the most important country in the Horn of Africa from the vantage point of American security concerns, may be spinning out of control due to the regime's increasingly brutal and unpredictable actions.

What is particularly disturbing and distressing is that it is not that you don't find space for coverage on Ethiopia—but these articles discuss at length the wellbeing of two cheetahs found in a restaurant, or the novelty of an Ethiopian version of “American Idol” on Ethiopian TV. These are apparently judged to be of such greater relevance for the Post's readership than the wellbeing of tens of thousands detained, hundreds killed, and the heightened political instability with implications for US national security, that the cheetah and “Ethiopian Idol” articles each got covered twice at length.^{vii} Amidst these and a range of other recent articles unrelated to the recent explosive political developments, we were not able to find a single article since your 18. November piece^{viii} that focused in more than passing fashion on the escalating government violence, and the continued courageous protests and resistance by youngsters and many ordinary Ethiopians in the face of this violence.

To sum up, there is a noble and greater purpose in bringing to the public's attention the stories which we believe most of your readers care about, i.e. the brave and patient struggle for basic human rights and democracy, and the potential of political instability, which can affect the US detrimentally in this globalised world, instead of dwelling at length on such frivolous issues as new Ethiopian song shows. For months if not years after the Tiananmen Square massacre, your paper honored those pro-democracy protesters by writing about their struggle and their ultimate sacrifice because the cause the students have died for resonates with most Americans including your readers. We believe your readership would expect the same from this highly respected paper with regard to what is currently unfolding in Ethiopia. We therefore strongly urge you to report on issues that are of great import and reflect core American values.

Respectfully,

Meskerem Girma
Chairperson

¹ National Public Radio report by Scott Simon, 24. December 2005:

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5068762

¹ Voice of America, 22. December 2005, “Ethiopia charges political opponents, journalists with treason”: www.voanews.com/english/2005-12-22-voa32.cfm

¹ Investigative TV report on British Channel 4, 4. December 2005, “Ethiopia's Agony”:
www.channel4.com/news/special-reports/special-reports-storypage.jsp?id=1271

¹ USA Today, 29. December 2005, “Key donors to withdraw \$375 million in Ethiopian aid”:
http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-12-29-ethiopiaaid_x.htm

¹ Human Rights Watch, 13. January 2006, “Ethiopia: Hidden crackdown in rural areas”:
<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/12/ethiopl12417.htm>

¹ Reuters, 5. January 2006, “US will not cut aid to Ethiopia – US Envoy”:
<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L05329922.htm>

¹ Washington Post, 12. January, 2006, “Ethiopian Idols' Reinterprets a Familiar Tune”; 9. January 2006, “Cheetahs Find Rare Refuge Amid Poverty Of Ethiopia”; 8. January 2006, “Ethiopian Idols' Offers Hope Amid Poverty”; 1. December 2006, “U.S. Troops Help Rescue Cheetahs in Ethiopia”

¹ 18. December 2005, “A Dream Defiled”.