

Public Statement

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Kampala: EHAHRDP welcomes the release of Ethiopian news editor Mr Amare Aregawi whilst being concerned about the narrowing space for media freedom

The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP) welcomes the release on the 27th August of Mr Amare Aregawi, managing editor of *The Reporter* weekly newspaper, who was arrested on the 22nd August in Addis Ababa on supposed defamation charges.

The arrest followed the publication of an article reporting on a labour dispute between the employees and management of a government-run brewery. The chair of the board of directors of the brewery is in fact the former minister of information and the current public relations advisor of Prime Minister Meles. Following his arrest Mr Aregawi had been illegally transported to a prison in Gondor where he finally appeared before a judge on Monday 25th August and subsequently released on bail.

The recent arrest of Mr. Aregawi follows the imprisonment of Mr Mesfin Negash, the editor of *Addis Neger*, an independent current affairs paper, on the 4th August on contempt charges after he interviewed the lawyer of a famous pop star who is currently on trial.

EHAHRDP is concerned by the increasing cases of harassment, arrest and prosecution of journalists as well as self-censorship in Ethiopia witnessed following the passing of a restrictive Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation in July 2008.

The Proclamation, which contains provisions that clearly contravene several key rights enshrined in the Ethiopian Constitution and internationally recognised standards of freedom of information, was passed with almost no consultation with civil society. Amendments made by Ethiopian journalists and lawyers were largely ignored.

Of particular concern to EHAHRDP are the criminal charges – notably for defamation- included in the law and the fact that those imprisoned for press offences have no avenue for judicial review.

“This recent case is one amongst many which reveals the government’s desire to limit freedom of expression using restrictive legislation. Such cases of intimidation and harassment are preventing independent journalists from pursuing their legitimate work and role” says Mr Hassan Shire, Chairperson of EHAHRD-Net. *“The space accorded to human rights defenders is ever decreasing in Ethiopia with the pending Draft Proclamation on Charities and Societies, which will be under review during the coming Parliament, another case in point.”*

As a result self censorship is rife in Ethiopia and independent journalists are reluctant to cover sensitive issues thus allowing key human rights violations to remain largely obscured as well as undermining the media coverage of key trials.

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