

Public Statement

11th March 2009

EHAHRD-Net Index GEN. 007/011/2009

KAMPALA: EHAHRD-Net calls on the international community to take decisive action in Ethiopia

The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network(EHAHRD-Net) today joined with Yared Hailemariam, founding member of EHAHRD-Net to call on the international community at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva to call on the Ethiopian government for the immediate repeal or amendment of the Charities and Societies Proclamation, which was passed by Parliament in January 2009.

Using the opportunity of the 10th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, Mr Yared Hailemariam, former member of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), who has been in exile after he found himself on the Ethiopian authorities' wanted list following the protests which followed the contested 2005 elections, offered an in-depth analysis of the most contentious and restrictive provisions of the Law.

“The Law fits very clearly into the government’s preparations for the 2010 elections” says Mr Hailemariam. “Civil society organizations played an important role prior to and during the contested 2005 elections, notably increasing voter awareness and turnout. In areas where they have been active- the opposition made significant gains. As a result independent organisations have come to be seen and treated as political opponents and as a serious threat to the government’s aim to remain in power. Cracking down on all form of civil society activism is easier than even considering defeat.”

Mr Hassan Shire Sheikh, Chairperson of EHAHRD-Net, has recently returned from Ethiopia, and therefore went on to describe how the Law is already having an impact on the ground worsening an already highly restrictive environment for Human Rights Defenders in the country. In his presentation Mr Shire explained that some of the developments which are of particular concern are the high levels of staff turnover, heightened mistrust amongst human rights organizations but also the fear amongst even the most respected and outspoken organizations of being shut down which is discouraging them from speaking out on key human rights issues.

“Ever since 2005 human rights organizations have been working within a very constricted environment which has more or less discourages significant human rights advocacy. The Law has merely given a legal coat to this government repression” says Mr Hassan Shire Sheikh. “The International Community has a significant influence in one of the world’s largest aid dependent countries and yet its reaction to the passing of the Law has been weak. It must react in a decisive manner immediately making sure that aid depends on a government’s respect for basic human

rights. If it does not call for the immediate repeal or significant amendment of the Law, human rights activism in Ethiopia will become illegal.”

For more information please contact Ms Laetitia Bader, Human Rights Officer at EHAHRDP:
advocacy@defenddefenders.org or +256-775-141756