



ETHIOPIAN SATELLITE TELEVISION ADVISORY BOARD DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES

May 21, 2010

On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day observed on May 3, 2010, President Barack Obama reminded the world of the “critical importance” of a free press “in challenging abuses of power, identifying corruption, and informing all citizens about the important issues that shape our world.” He noted:

Last year was a bad one for the freedom of the press worldwide. While people gained greater access than ever before to information through the Internet, cell phones and other forms of connective technologies, governments like China, Ethiopia, Iran, and Venezuela curtailed freedom of expression by limiting full access to and use of these technologies.

The recent successful launch of the historic satellite television service to Ethiopia represents a giant step in the direction of freedom of information for all Ethiopians.

ESAT has arrived at a critical time in Ethiopian history. Over the past five years, press freedom in Ethiopia has been at its lowest point in history. Journalists, reporters and editors have been victims of government harassment, intimidation and persecution, and independent newspapers have been shuttered. This fact has been documented by diverse international human rights groups and organizations. In the 2009 Freedom House in its “Press Freedom Rankings” placed Ethiopia at 165/195 countries. That same year, Reporters Without Borders ranked Ethiopia at 140/175 countries in which press freedom is flagrantly violated. The Committee to Protect Journalists in 2007 ranked Ethiopia as number 1 among the “top 10 backslider” countries “worldwide where press freedom has deteriorated the most over the last five years.” Recently the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ; the world’s largest organization of journalists) condemned the jamming of the Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts. The IFJ described the action as “unprofessional, intolerant” and something that “flies in the face of promises that the Ethiopian Government is committed to press freedom.”

The individual stories of courageous Ethiopian journalists who have risked their freedom and lives to expose repression, corruption and human rights violations has been inspiring.

The ruling regime continues to use a so-called press law to criminalize the profession of journalism. Journalists, reporters, editors and other media professionals continue to face brutal crackdowns, arbitrary imprisonments and harassments. Just in the past few days, the editor-in-chief of Awramba Times, the last remaining independent newspaper, resigned after he was officially warned that he “will be fully responsible for any bloodshed that may occur in connection

with the coming election.” Several months ago editors of Addis Neger, another independent newspaper, fled the county after they learned of plans to arrest them for their journalistic activities.

ESAT has come into existence at a time when the curtain of darkness draws down tightly on Ethiopia. ESAT is the result of the collective efforts of a small but diverse group of Ethiopians throughout the world who are deeply committed to the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Among the contributors to this effort include exiled Ethiopian journalists, human rights advocates, university professors, lawyers, entertainers, entrepreneurs, civic society leaders and others from a variety of professions, and individuals committed to fundamental democratic principles.

ESAT is founded on the simple conviction that a free press is essential to an informed and enlightened citizenry, government transparency and accountability and equitable socio-economic development. We believe that a threat to press freedom is a threat to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. We reject the belief that by controlling what people read, hear and think, it is possible to control their hearts and minds.

Above all, we believe the right of the Ethiopian people to receive information without interference and regardless of frontiers is secured by longstanding principles of international law and the Ethiopian Constitution. The U.N. General Assembly in its very first session in 1946 adopted resolution 59 (I) declared: “Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and ... the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated.” In 1948, freedom of the press became a core human right principle when the U.N. enshrined it in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and impart information and ideas through any media *regardless of frontiers*.” This universal right is today acknowledged robustly and expansively in Articles 29 and 13 of the Ethiopian Constitution:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression *without interference*. This right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through other media of his choice. Freedom of the press and mass media as well as freedom of artistic creation is guaranteed... [and] *censorship in any form is prohibited*.

Our unwavering support for press freedom in Ethiopia is principled and supported in fact. All of us at ESAT believe that a free and independent press serves as the eyes, ears and mouths of citizens in any society. As a watchdog, an independent press keeps those in power honest. Where there is a fully functioning free press, leaders no longer become untouchable gods sitting high on a pedestal to be worshipped, but ordinary men and women who are accountable to their citizens for their actions and omissions; and government institutions operate with transparency and openness. A well-functioning independent press, we believe, will toil vigorously to expose the corruption, abuse of power, misuse and theft of taxpayer money and scandal among those exercising power and their supporting cast of invisible power brokers, influence peddlers and fixers.

When it informs, a free press educates citizens on public policies, choices and decisions. We believe that when citizens are informed on societal issues and problems, and are exposed to the range of competing potential solutions, they will make informed choices, the right choices. Without free access to information and ideas, citizens are unable to participate meaningfully in the political life of their nation by exercising their right to vote or by taking part in shaping the process of public decision-making.

We also believe that an independent press plays a vital role in equitable and sustainable economic development. As a former World Bank president aptly noted: “If you cannot enfranchise poor people, if they do not have a right to expression, if there is no searchlight on corruption and inequitable practices, you cannot build the public consensus needed to bring about change. A free press is not a luxury.”

Our belief in press freedom is not limited to abstract values. We believe that a well functioning independent press will go beyond critical review to becoming a positive agent of social change. Leaders benefit from heeding the independent press and correcting their mistakes when it is pointed out to them. They can use the press to communicate with the people they govern and become more accountable, transparent and responsive to their citizens. An independent free press is never the enemy of good government. It is its strongest ally. Through the press, leaders keep their fingers on the pulse of the people, learn about what ails them, angers them, pleases them, confuses and concerns them. At the dawn of the 21st Century, the Information Age, it is folly for anyone to think or believe that they can keep a nation ignorant and deny them the means to demand accountability.

We pledge to make ESAT an outlet for free expression to all Ethiopians. Our doors shall remain open to all who believe in and support the establishment of democracy, protection of human rights and institutionalization of the rule of law in Ethiopia. We are not and will never be partial to any individual, group, program, ideology, profession or occupation. The singular mission for which we are dedicated is the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Ethiopia. In pursuit of that mission, we are prepared to join hands with all people.

Our Plea for YOUR Support

We believe it is our duty as freedom-loving Ethiopians to help deliver “information and ideas of all kinds” to Ethiopians “regardless of frontiers.” Ethiopians hunger not only for bread but also for truthful and accurate information to sustain for their hearts and minds. With the independent press intimidated out of existence and the country walled in and made a fortress of censorship, we must do what we can to pierce the wall of darkness with accurate, fair, balanced and truthful information. This is a great challenge and all freedom-loving Ethiopians must join the effort and become one of the thousand points of light shining on the information darkness blanketing Ethiopia.

An enormous amount of effort and sacrifices by a few individuals have gone into launching ESAT. The time, energy and effort that has gone into this historic effort can not be calculated easily. Now is the time for all freedom loving Ethiopians to join up and help build and support ESAT to become the envy of press freedom on the African continent. Much has been done and much more needs to be done. It takes enormous resources to be able to support a satellite television project of this magnitude and put it on a strong foundation. We need the help of every Ethiopian and anyone who believes in the cause of liberty, NOW. Those of you who can help us financially, we need your support NOW. We need your help to cover the cost of original programming, technical services, special productions and other activities necessary to keep ESAT on the air.

It is not only your one time donation that we need, but your sustaining support as well. Those of you who can help us technically, we need your help NOW. Those of you who can help us by giving us moral support, we need your support NOW.

Let us all as Ethiopians join hands and resolve in our hearts and minds to become a thousand points of light shining brightly like the stars on the curtain of darkness that has enveloped Ethiopia today.

We need your help NOW because “failure is not an option” in our historic efforts!

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