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DEAN, NEW JERSEY DELEGATION

*Excerpts of Remarks by Rep. Chris Smith  
September 13, 2016*

Yesterday, I and Congressmen Keith Ellison, Mike Coffman, Eliot Engel, and Al Green introduced House Resolution 861 supporting respect for human rights and encouraging inclusive governance in Ethiopia. This legislation has been the product of a long effort to promote democracy and good governance in Ethiopia.

When I visited Ethiopia in August 2005, the purpose of my fact-finding trip was to determine why the May election results still had not been released and why peaceful demonstrators had been shot by government security forces. Then-Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was nonchalant about the shooting and told me that he had dossiers on his political opposition and could arrest them at any time.

In November 2005, more peaceful demonstrators were shot by government forces and opposition and human rights organization leaders were arrested, sometimes on charges that Ethiopian courts said were nonexistent. Even when charges were found to be unfounded, the government refused to let these leaders free. One of them, Hailu Shawel, who headed the main opposition party, was diabetic and was denied his medicine. That threatened his life. Others also were older men held under harsh circumstances, putting their health at risk.

I and my staff have remained in contact with the Ethiopian government over the last 11 years in an effort to convince them to moderate their behavior toward their citizens. Unfortunately, this moderation has not taken place. If anything, the actions of the government of Ethiopia have intensified in its effort to shut down its political opposition and critics in civil society.

The annual State Department Human rights Report, as well as many other human rights reports cite serious human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, killings and torture committed by Ethiopian government security forces; restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of association, politically motivated trials; harassment and intimidation of opposition party members and journalists.

This has created a genuine climate of fear in Ethiopia. During the recent Summer Olympic Games in Brazil, Ethiopian marathon runner Feyisa Lilesa

won a silver medal in the men's race. After raising his arms in a gesture of solidarity with protesters from among his Oromo people, Lilesa is now afraid to return home and is seeking asylum. He is here with us today.

Lilesa is not alone in fearing harsh punishment from the Ethiopian government. Several survivors of torture at the hands of the Ethiopian government are here with us today as well. Demssew Tsega Abebe is also an Ethiopian long distance runner. In December last year, he joined thousands of Oromos who were protesting a government seizure of land. Singled out by security forces, he was tortured on the heels of his feet because security forces knew he was a runner.

Feyera Sobokssa was an accountant for Ethiopian Airlines. He was tortured for speaking about discrimination against the Oromo ethnic group. Active for many years as a Truth Speaker for human rights groups, he also is here with us today.

Let me emphasize at this point that we acknowledge that Ethiopia has been an ally of the United States and a positive contributor to international peacekeeping. This fact has prevented any hint of punitive action, such as my earlier Ethiopia Human Rights Act, no matter how relatively minimal any sanctions may have been. However, egregious human rights violations must always be pointed out and condemned even if an ally is the one being criticized.

House Resolution 861 condemns the human rights violations by the Government of Ethiopia, from the denial of freedoms and legal recourse for such denials to the displacement of farmers in violation of international principles. It calls for that government to end the use of excessive force by security forces – a position also taken by the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power. This legislation calls for credible investigations into the government killings in the Oromia and Amhara regions, as well as the recent fire and shootings at Qilinto Prison.

House Resolution 861 also urges the Government of Ethiopia to allow a UN human rights rapporteur to conduct an independent examination of the state of human rights in Ethiopia. That government has demonstrated an inability or unwillingness to credibly examine its own behavior, and the impunity of its security forces is only leading to further human rights violations.

The Government of Ethiopia undoubtedly sees itself as a part of the Global War on Terror, but violating the rights of its own citizens will only create the kind of frustration that will lead to domestic violence. Our resolution calls on protesters to refrain from violence, but in the long run, that will only happen if people have the right to voice their opposition to government action peacefully and seek redress of the denial of their rights effectively.

This is the aim of House Resolution 861, and we hope our Administration and the Government of Ethiopia understand we are trying to prevent serious unrest in Ethiopia so that democracy and the rule of law can be genuinely enjoyed by the people of Ethiopia.