

TESTIMONY OF BEKELE WAYU WARIYO

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, U.S. House of Representatives

June 26, 2014

I would like to thank the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for making it possible for TASSC International and torture survivors to address you today.

My name is Bekele Wayu Wariyo, I am a torture survivor from Hawassa, Ethiopia. I hope that exposing the horrible repression committed by the Ethiopian government against its people will do something to improve the situation in my country. One of my goals is to change the way Congress and the American people see Ethiopia—the Ethiopian government does a good job of hiding the truth about what is happening in our country. There is no freedom for people to organize opposition political parties and no free media. You may not know that because of phony elections, the ruling party controls 546 out of 547 seats in the parliament.

And the government is telling lies to foreign donors like the United States about everything, about agricultural production, about education and about health improvements. I know a lot about the health and nutrition because I worked for 12 years as a nurse, researcher, lecturer, and CEO of the Hawassa Hospital. I can tell you that 85% of Ethiopians are going hungry and many are starving.

My parents are from a famous family who belong to Sidama ethnic group, the third largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. Sidamas make a major economic contribution to the central government. My father breeds cattle and produces high quality, organic Arabica coffee which is the backbone of the country's economy. There is even a special Starbucks coffee called Sidamo, because the coffee from our region is so special. My father is known for standing up for the Sidama people and for opposing the Ethiopian regime, called the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, or EPRDF.

The Sidama people live in south central Ethiopia, part of a region called the Southern Nations Nationalities and People's Regional State (SNNPRS). They have their own special traditions, culture, calendar and language. Like many other Sidama intellectuals and business people, I believe the Sidama should have regional autonomy, and that is why the Ethiopian government persecuted and tortured me.

I became very active for Sidama rights after the regime massacred unarmed, peaceful Sidama demonstrators in 2002 on the outskirts of Hawassa, the capital of Sidama (?). All they were doing were calling for regional autonomy and protesting about how much Sidama contributes to Ethiopia's economy, but the corrupt, ruling regime does not invest back in Sidama. Ethiopian federalism is not like federalism in the United States, it is a kind

of pseudo-federalism where the ruling party rewards its puppets and kills and tortures people like me who want a fairer government. Government troops killed our people because we called on them to build more schools, hospitals, infrastructure in Sidama.

In 2005, I was a Project Manager for a non-governmental organization working on HIV prevention and support for people living with HIV. I had a degree in Public Health and had already worked as a nurse for the Ethiopian government. I was also campaigning for a Sidama candidate running for the Ethiopian parliament. My political party, which supports regional autonomy for Sidama, did extremely well but the ruling party falsified the election results and then harassed and persecuted opposition leaders and their supporters like me.

The only thing I did was campaign for a candidate for parliament. That is why the security forces came to my house and forced me to go with them. They called me a “traitor” and a “terrorist,” terms they use to describe anyone who criticizes the ruling party. The government even passed a so-called “anti-terrorism” law in 2008. The purpose of the law is not to fight terrorists, but to arrest anyone who criticizes the government.

I was detained for 15 days and physically abused. I have scars on my head as a result of the beatings. I was arrested on June 10, 2005. Four armed federal policeman raided my home and told to go with them for questioning. They dragged me into their vehicle. On the way to the police station they beat me with a police baton on my head and back. I sustained an injury on my head and that left visible permanent scar.

At the police station, they threw me from the car on to the ground, injuring my knee and elbow. They threw me against the wall and kept calling me “*naotegna*” or terrorist, and placed me in solitary confinement for 15 days. “They kept me in a tiny, dark, filthy room that had a hole in the ground use as a toilet. My body was bleeding, I couldn’t clean the blood off because there was nothing to wash with. The only time I got to go out of this room was for the interrogation.

They interrogated me and accused me of trying to topple the government by force. My party, the Sidama Liberation Movement, did not want to do overthrow the government, we just wanted to compete in elections. The Ethiopian constitution allows regional autonomy, which is necessary to improve the lives of Sidama’s six million people. They beat me severely and said if I keep supporting Sidama rights, they would kill me.

I was detained again in 2006 for 11 days, and in August 2012 for one month and 17 days. In 2012, I was a university lecturer at Hawassa University, teaching classes on health management and health economics, and doing research on public health. I also continued my political activities with the Sidama Liberation Movement.

Police came to my workplace and took me to the Hawassa police station, then to a small cell with 12 other Sidama intellectuals and businessmen. We were held incommunicado, no one

knew where we were. Then they took me to prison, where hundreds of people, including murderers, were held in one cell together.

They mentally tortured me, the police said things to me like: "Oh, you are still alive, haven't you stopped your political activities." When I finally was released, I felt powerless, they wanted to take away my ability to think independently so they could totally control my body and mind. After being released I had to report to the police every week. They were following me and monitoring all my activities. This is when I decided to leave my wife and three children and flee the country.

Now I am living in Silver Spring, Maryland, waiting for my political asylum application to be approved. I am grateful to TASSC for helping me while I am alone in this country without my family or friends.

To conclude, I would like to offer my recommendations on how Congress can help Ethiopians and other Africans.

First, Congress should tell the Ethiopian government to respect basic human rights like freedom of speech and free elections. At the US-Africa Leaders Summit in August, when President Obama meets with Ethiopian president Mulatu Teshome and other African leaders, they will focus on increasing trade. But if people have no rights and the government is torturing people, Ethiopians will not be productive, more trade will not improve their lives.

Ethiopia receives over \$800 million in development aid, more than any other African country. But a lot of this money is not going for real development, it goes for high salaries for ruling party officials who buy big houses for themselves. Ethiopia is trying to hide the truth about what it does with U.S. tax dollars, that is one reason it passed the Charities and Societies Proclamation to paralyze civil society organizations. The United States needs to speak directly to lawyers, health professionals, bloggers, journalists, and leaders from opposition political parties such as the Sidama Liberation Movement, the Unity for Justice Party, and the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Unity Forum.

Finally an immediate step that Congress can take is to pressure the Ethiopian government to release political prisoners like the journalists and bloggers arrested last month.

Thank you for listening to my testimony today, I hope that you can take some action to bring relief to the suffering Ethiopian people under the oppressive regime now in power.