

Testimony of Abraham T. Zere

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Thank you, Congressman Hultgren and Congressman McGovern, Commission members, and staff, for conducting this important hearing. I'm honored to be here.

In comparison to average Eritreans, I am one of the most privileged. I will tell you why.

I have nine siblings. All of us have served in the Eritrean military. Because of this, ten of us have never met together at any given time. The only family portrait we have is photo-shopped. Seven of the ten members of the family are now in exile.

I was writing for a private newspaper in Eritrea, called *Zemen*, while in my final year of secondary school in 2000. I joined the department of journalism and mass communication hoping that have a bright future in the growing private media. After completing my freshman year in 2001 and returning from the labor camp along with students of the University of Asmara, all the private newspapers were banned. Their editors were also taken into custody. For close to 17 years now, the fate of my mentor Amanuel Asrat and of another eleven journalists is unknown.

The only option left for me was the state-owned newspaper. I had a weekly column but later I resigned as my articles started to displease the information minister then, Mr. Ali Abdu. Some years later when I wrote one article in the party magazine, Ali Abdu responded in state newspaper. He identified me as a national security threat and called for my arrest. Then I completely stopped writing. Three years later Abdu fled the country and sought political asylum in Australia.

In the fall of 2011, I received a scholarship from Ohio University. As travel is controlled by the office of the President, I had to lobby and pull influential contacts for four months. Finally, few days before my planned departure, I was denied exit visa.

I went in person to the office of the president to discuss my case with the director. In 2012, I was permitted to go to South Africa for a study. I was only able to go this far because of my connection.

I was very fortunate. Then most of my friends were in prison in connection with the *Radio Bana* raid. Twenty-nine journalists and staff members of the educational radio station were held in a military prison from four to six years. As Tesfagiorgis Habte, who studied journalism with me, wrote later, they were forced to defecate in their dishes and later wash them for eating food. You do not need to commit any offense to be arrested in Eritrea. For example, one person stayed for four years in prison with the *Radio Bana* journalists only because he was mistaken for another person with the same first name.

Now I write for different media. Still the Eritrean government attempts to silence me from afar. In July 2017, when I wrote one article for *Aljazeera English*, the Eritrean ministry of information issued a statement, calling me “a notorious author who routinely engages in a smear campaign against the country.” Not sure who did it, but last month my blog was attacked with malware. These examples are on top of the endless trolling and hate messages that I receive regularly.

However, I am also aware of the conditions state journalists inside the country. As part of the popular army program, journalists have been required to attend military drills and guard government offices since 2012. Now their performance is measured mainly by the military. If journalists commit the slightest mistake they are being disciplined not as journalists, but soldiers.

As I said at the beginning, mine is a privileged position, but if I have little time I can mention two typical examples to show how Eritreans are not afraid of death now but living in deplorable conditions indefinitely.

My first cousin Mibrak Nerayo who was killed by human traffickers in Sinai in 2010. Although the ransom was paid, yet her life was not spared. Despite the family tragedy, Mibrak's son, Samuel has reached Europe last year through Libya.

Or as Shishai Shimondi, a member of PEN Eritrea tells, he decided to flee Eritrea a week after the Lampedusa tragedy of October 2013 that took the lives of more than 300 Eritreans. After completing his first degree in Business Administration, Shishai was assigned as a teacher.

With a monthly pay of about \$25, he was expected to cover all expenses in a remote place from his hometown with this amount. With such conditions he managed for about three years. Yet, he was required to carry gun and attend military training on top of his teaching duties.

After being caught and imprisoned for three and half months in Libya, he succeeded to escape from the prison. Near the end of 2014, through the Mediterranean Sea, he was able to reach Europe.

Thank you!