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**Exiled Journalists' Network (EJN)**



**Press Freedom Forum Series**

***Public Order, State Security and  
Press Freedom in Ethiopia:  
Towards finding a common ground***

**FORUM REPORT**

**27 & 29 September 2006  
London, UK**

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### **The Exiled Journalists' Network (EJN)**

The EJN ([www.exiledjournalists.net](http://www.exiledjournalists.net)) is a ground-breaking organisation set up to provide support to journalists who seek refuge in the UK after persecution for fulfilling their professional media duties. The group, the first of its kind anywhere in the world - organised by and for exiled journalists - aims to promote press freedom globally the world and assist both asylum seeking and refugee journalists.

Set up with the help of The MediaWise Trust, and supported by the National Union of Journalists, it was officially launched as an independent organisation in October 2005. Its current Co-ordinator is Forward Maisokwadzo, a journalist from Zimbabwe.

EJN patrons include Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, journalist and commentator; Richard Dowden, Journalist and Director of the Royal African Society; Lindsey Hilsum, Channel 4 News' China bureau chief and Tim Lezard, former President of NUJ.

### **The MediaWise Trust**

The MediaWise Trust ([www.mediawise.org.uk](http://www.mediawise.org.uk)) is an independent Bristol-based charity with an international reputation for its work on journalism ethics. It was set up in 1993 by 'victims of media abuse' and sympathetic journalists and lawyers to improve the standards and standing of journalism.

MediaWise assists members of the public with complaints about media malpractice; conducts research into media law, policy and practice; contributes to public debate about the role and impact of the mass media; and provides training for journalists and non-governmental organisations. Its specialisms include coverage of children, health, minorities, and suicide.

The Director of MediaWise is Mike Jempson, a campaigning journalist, author and trainer. He is a Visiting Professor in Media Ethics at Lincoln University School of Journalism.

In 1999 MediaWise launched the Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Media (RAM) Project ([www.ramproject.org.uk](http://www.ramproject.org.uk)) to promote best practice in media coverage of refugee and asylum issues. The project gave rise to the formation of the Exiled Journalists' Network.

### **The Royal African Society**

Now more than 100 years old, the Royal African Society ([www.royalafricansociety.org](http://www.royalafricansociety.org)) today is the primary organisation promoting Africa's cause in Britain. Through its journal, *African Affairs*, and by organising meetings, discussions and other activities, the Society strengthens links between Africa and Britain and encourages understanding of Africa and its relations with the rest of the world.

The Society has about 1,000 members with branches in Bristol and Scotland. Queen Elizabeth II is the Society's Patron and the President is Chief Emeka Anyaoku, former Secretary General of the Commonwealth. Its Director is journalist Richard Dowden, formerly Africa Editor of *The Independent* and *The Economist*, who has covered Africa for more than 20 years.

### **The Frontline Club**

Frontline ([www.frontlineclub.com](http://www.frontlineclub.com)) is a journalists' club in Paddington, West London that uniquely combines eating, drinking and thinking, with a private clubroom for members, and a restaurant and forum space open to the public. It exists to promote freedom of expression and support journalists, cameramen and photographers who risk their lives in the course of their work.

Set up by surviving members of the original Frontline team of maverick cameramen, it is dedicated to the memory of friends and colleagues who lost their lives gathering news and images from the world's conflict zones. Its Director is Vaughan Smith.

## Introduction

This report describes two events aimed at facilitating open debate amongst journalists, press freedom campaigners, human rights activists, trade unionists, the Ethiopian Diaspora in the UK, and others concerned about the continuing crisis in Ethiopia particularly the arbitrary arrests and detention of Ethiopian journalists. It discusses the crisis in Ethiopia, its regional and international implications, and the role of the international media and civil society in the struggle for democratic governance, press freedom, human rights, and justice.

It is produced as a record of the events, a briefing to non-governmental organisations, civil society and media agencies, and as a catalyst for further interventions in support of a just and stable society in Ethiopia.

The Open Forum on Ethiopia 2006 was the first of the Press Freedom Forum Series of events organised by the Exiled Journalists' Network (EJN) in association with sister organisations.

Freedom of expression and press freedom, enshrined in Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are indispensable to building strong democracies, promoting mass civic participation in governance and the rule of law, and encouraging human development and security. Sadly, however, media professionals all over the world continue to face repression ranging from death, kidnapping, arbitrary arrests, detentions, protracted prison terms to varying forms of censorship.

The situation of press freedom today has so deteriorated that to be a journalist is now generally considered to be a risky enterprise. In 2005, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) documented the killing in the line of duty of 150 media professionals, the largest annual number killed in recorded history. Added to this surge is the increasing number of media professionals facing threats and harassment, with at least 500 reportedly detained or imprisoned in 2005.

As part of its activities to commemorate World Press Freedom Day, the Paris-based press freedom watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) compiles an annual worldwide list of predators of press freedom, to expose those powerful people who continue to attack journalists and media outlets. In its 2006 Annual Report, RSF reported that 'violence against journalists is now routine in Bangladesh, the Philippines, Nigeria and Mexico and it goes unpunished', and warned that imprisonment is now the favoured weapon of authoritarian rulers to silence journalists. Over 100 journalists are currently languishing in jails around the world, mostly in China, Cuba, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran and Burma.

RSF notes: "In these places, a sharp commentary, an over-strong adjective or an irritating news item are immediately dubbed "threats to public order," "sedition" or "undermining state security." Punishment can be five, 10 or even 20-year prison sentences, as well as cancellation of civil rights, all aimed at breaking the journalist involved and frightening others who might utter some critical or disobedient thought".

Although press freedom campaigners agree that most authoritarian regimes often try to use the protection of 'Public Order' and 'State Security' as an excuse to deal with sections of the media perceived to be challenging the *status quo*, public forums to raise awareness of the possible exaggeration, or the genuineness of the alleged fears of the state - and above all on

how to strike a balance between freedom of the press and these fears - are virtually non-existent. The EJM has launched the Press Freedom Forum Series to help fill this void, with the first focusing on the situation in Ethiopia, the African country with the highest number of imprisoned journalists.

Conceived as an inclusive, non-partisan, non-governmental forum, the two-part event took place with the support of the Royal African Society at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, on 27 September 2006, followed by a media discussion at the Frontline Club on 29 September.

The 27 September Seminar at SOAS discussed issues around “*Public Order, State Security and Press Freedom in Ethiopia: Towards finding a common ground.*”

It had two panels - the first comprised of Ethiopians recounting their experience of the situation on the ground; on the second, press freedom campaigners described their efforts to improve the situation.

The first and second chapters of this report cover the two panels respectively. The final chapter focuses on the media discussion at the Frontline Club where the panellists had the opportunity to meet with the British media.

Discussion highlighted the value of engaging the Ethiopian government, the international community and the international media in efforts to find a common ground between public order and state security on one hand, and press freedom on the other. However, clear consensus developed around the need for the Western media to put the Ethiopian crisis on its news agenda to generate urgent action from the US and UK authorities to support European Union initiatives to improve the situation.

This Forum should not be seen as an end in itself but the beginning of sustained efforts to reduce tensions between the state and private media in Ethiopia as well as in other countries undergoing ‘transition’.

The two events were attended by about 100 people altogether. A perverse decision by the UK Embassy in Addis Ababa prevented the attendance of one key speaker, Derbew Temesgen Meshesha, a journalist and human rights lawyer living and practising in Ethiopia but he managed to contribute to the Frontline Club event by tele-conference. Nevertheless, stimulated by strong presentations from speakers at both events, and by the continued detention of journalists in Ethiopia, there was lively debate. Participants highlighted the inseparability of the current political and economic crisis and the need for swift intervention to help journalists in Ethiopia. There was animated discussion of the role that the media and international community might play in promoting press freedom and democracy in Ethiopia.

The dual-event Forum was funded by the Open Society Institute, with logistical support from the Royal African Society and the Frontline Club. This report is compiled from detailed notes of the proceedings compiled and edited by the rapporteur Dr Ibrahim Seaga Shaw. It provides a full account of the presentations and discussion.

**Dr Ibrahim Seaga Shaw**  
EJM Board Member  
Programme Coordinator, Press Freedom Forum Series

**Forward Maisokwadzo**  
EJM Co-ordinator

# Press Freedom Forum 1: *The Ethiopian Experience*

Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London  
Wednesday 27 October 2006

## **PANEL ONE:**     *Accounts of victims of violations*

**Moderator:**   **Laura Sandys**, Chair, Open Democracy

**Speakers:**   **Ato Kifle Mulat**, President of the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association now living in exile in Uganda.  
                  **Wondimu Mekonnen**, UK-based Ethiopian human rights activist and accountant.

Bound up in chains and sporting a black safari suit, in solidarity with many of his colleagues in prison and exile, **Kifle Mulat**, President of the Ethiopia Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA), said he did not bring gold, diamond or precious presents from Uganda, where he is living in exile, nor did he come to collect charity money, but rather to speak for the “voiceless” - innocent people as well as incarcerated fellow journalists - locked up in “dungeons”.

He lamented how practicing sober journalism in Africa now means a clean passport to hell. While recognising that the situation has got worse over the years, he observed that journalists in many African countries, particularly in Ethiopia, have been persecuted for being the eyes and ears of the neglected masses. He warned that reversing this “tragedy” must not be postponed. “I am here to request the advocates of the freedom of the press, human rights organisations and civic organisations to form an urgent task force to co-ordinate efforts to protect the rights of the persecuted”.

Mulat said the Ethiopian journalists currently languishing in jail must not be considered just as professional colleagues but rather as brothers, sisters and partners in the struggle for peace, democracy and freedom. He referred to his colleagues in exile in Sudan, Djibouti, Yemen, Egypt, Uganda, Tanzania and South Africa as “promoters of your vision for freedom, equality and human rights.” He noted that Ethiopia has made a sad history for itself by becoming not only the African country with the largest number of journalists in prison, but also the country with the largest number of journalists living in exile.

Emphasising the watchdog role of the press, the EFJA President noted that for democracy to work, government policies and actions must be subjected to “close scrutiny not only by the legislature and judicial authorities but also by the free press and public opinion”. But he admitted that this is a far cry from the situation in Ethiopia, where freedom of expression has been denied for centuries.

Despite all the unkind words heaped on the Addis Ababa regime, Mulat could not help recalling the promising signs of press freedom contained in the charter issued by Meles Zenawi’s Transitional government which overthrew Mengistu’s military regime in May 1991. The 1992 October 21 Government Press Freedom Proclamation, said Mulat, was full of

“bright prospects” for the free press, and led to the emergence of the “first private papers and magazines” in the capital and many other towns. “The free press in Ethiopia emerged suddenly and unexpectedly like a flood that overflows its banks. It was pioneered by young, socially conscious, financially unequipped, and democratic elements of the society”.

He added that most of those who launched independent publications had neither professional training nor experience, but they were “courageous, committed, strongly patriotic and upheld democratic ideals.”

Euphoria about the free press was short-lived. After an initial period of remarkable growth, he explained “the number of free press publications dwindled at an alarming rate. Up until the beginning of the second year of the promulgation of the press proclamation, the number of press publications...had reached 287. At present, there is no independent media in Ethiopia”.

In the clamp-down that followed, he said, the government banned almost all private newspapers, and raided newspaper and EFJA offices, confiscating computers, printers, fax machines, documents and other materials. He recalled that in the space of five years (1993-1998) more than 200 journalists were imprisoned for not less than three months before being released.

During this same period, 23 journalists were sentenced to jail terms ranging from three months to three years; 19 who were charged with violating the press law were sentenced to pay fines totalling £16,000, ranging from £50 to £2,000; while more than 24 were forced into exile. Top among the punitive measures taken by the government against the free press, he said, were arbitrary detentions, exorbitant fines (sometimes reaching £1,500), biased court rulings by largely inexperienced judges hand-picked by the government, police harassment, government controls limiting the distribution of newspapers, increasing the cost of state-controlled printing, and limiting advertising in the private media.

The worse time came in December 2005, Mulat said, when 21 free press journalists were charged with “involvement in an illegal attempt to overthrow the government”. Those charged included himself and five journalists of Ethiopian descent who worked for the Voice of America (VOA) Amharic service in Washington. Among those detained was Serkalem Fasil, who was pregnant when she was arrested. She subsequently gave birth to a baby boy who suffers health problems.

“Journalists Sisay Agona, Eskinder Nega and Andulaem Arage are still in a solitary confinement which has no sun or artificial light and with the worst hygienic conditions. They are able to go to (the) toilet only once a day under armed escort, and couldn’t meet their families or friends,” he said adding that two more journalists, Solomon Aregawi of the *Weekly Hadar* and Goshu Moges of the *Weekly Lisane Hezeb*, have since been added to the notorious list of ‘November prisoners’.

Mulat was quick to observe that the Ethiopian government has always been quick to hide behind public order and state security concerns to justify high-handed regulations and actions against journalists. He noted that well over 90 percent of the charges filed against journalists allege that “the journalist has printed and disseminated information and articles that provoke hatred and animosity, and incite people to war and violence,” and that most of the charges

allege that the journalist has violated this or that provision of the press law (for example, Article 10 (1), or Article 20 (1) of Press Proclamation no.34/84, or Article 480-481 (1) of the Penal Code). He said that no evidence has been offered in court to prove that a journalist has incited the people to take up arms against the government through his articles.

“This shows the magnitude of the glaring administrative injustice that has been imposed on free press journalists in Ethiopia,” he said.

While attending a conference in Uganda (31 October - 04 November 2005) jointly organised by Amnesty International (AI) and Centre For Refugee Studies at York University, Mulat said his name was published on an Ethiopian government ‘most wanted list’ and faced immediate arrest upon return. As he was not sure about getting a fair trial, he decided to stay in Uganda under the protection of Amnesty International.

He recounted a catalogue of persecution he had experienced earlier in his journalistic career:

“In 1992, as chief editor of *Zena Admas* private newspaper, I was detained at the Central Investigation Department for 8 days and jailed at the Addis Ababa prison for 21 days.

“In 1992, as chief editor of *Addis Admas* private newspaper, I was detained for one month after which I was released upon payment of money amounting to Birr 10,000.

“In 1994, as chief editor of *Ethio-Time* bi-lingual newspaper, I was detained for one month after which I was released upon payment of bail money amounting to Birr 10,000.

“In 1996/97, as editor of *Ethio-time* bi-lingual newspaper, I completed a six month prison term after which I was released.

“In 1998, as chairman of the EFJA co-ordinating committee, a charge was filed against me for issuing and disseminating a press statement.

“I was detained for seven months without due process of the law at the Central Investigation Department and Addis Ababa Central Prison, and later released on bail.

“The first Criminal Bench of the Federal High Court on 1 March 2002 found me guilty of violating the Press Proclamation and imposed on me a fine amounting to Birr 12,000”.

Mulat singled out for special mention one of his cases relating to an alleged violation of one of the articles of the 1992 Press Proclamation (Article 10 (1), 20 (1) No 34/84, Ethiopian calendar), and Article 480 (1) of the Penal Code, and read out the particulars of the charge:

*The defendant, while working as publisher and editor-in-chief of Ethio-Time private newspaper, failing to fulfil his obligation to ensure that the contents of material or information he disseminates in the newspaper are free from legal accountability has published in the just mentioned newspaper, an article entitled - “The hell that existed under the Derg continues to exist under the present leadership. The only change is that “the hell” has continued to exist for more years. It is regrettable that the international community has failed to realise the dictatorial features of the Woyanes!*

*It is regrettable that the dictatorial party has taken the law in to its own hands and that it has trampled upon justice!" The article that was published under the above-mentioned title, according to the charge, called on the Ethiopian people not only to make their voices for their country heard but to embark on an effective movement and struggle. The defendant, the charge continues, has, by publishing the above material, disseminated fabricated information against the state and spread information that shake up the public.*

The EFJA President said he wished his article had succeeded in shaking up public opinion, which he said is needed if the people are to take an active part in shaping their destiny.

He noted the irony of the fact that the "government uses the free press as a 'trade mark' of democracy for overseas consumption. It uses it as a means of obtaining loans and funds", he said, while in the country it continues to "brutally and ruthlessly" suppress the free press.

"The objective of the struggle of the free press in Ethiopia is not to share state power with any government, but only to liberate itself from repression and terror, and provide free information that is to the advantage of the country and the people," he said.

Mulat ended his presentation by affirming that the EFJA, winner of the IFJ Rob Baker Memorial Award 1996, the IPI Free Media Pioneer Award, the Freedom to Write International Award from PEN US and Amnesty International Media Award 2004, would continue to challenge and fight these repressive actions. "I firmly believe that all of you would stand shoulder to shoulder with EFJA and all Ethiopian journalists in their protest against the repressive measures taken by the dictatorial regime," he said.

**Wondimu Mekonnen** opened with some harsh words for the British authorities who had refused an entry visa to Derbew Temesgen Meshesha, the human rights lawyer and journalist for whom Wondimu was standing in. He hinted that the refusal of a visa preventing Derbew's ability to participate in an important event shows the extent to which the British authorities are prepared to go in supporting their strong ally in the region – the Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Had the lawyer been able to attend, the audience would have heard first hand about his trying experience in defending persecuted journalists in Ethiopia over the last fifteen years.

Mekonnen explained that, although he has never been a journalist, the situation in his native Ethiopia turned him into a radical human rights activist while he was a lecturer at the University in Addis Ababa.

He focused on how the Ethiopian regime has twisted and used the law to suppress the free press and human rights activists.

"These laws are there to protect the interests of the regime. Big Western powers like the UK, France and the US have been involved in helping to draft the best laws you can imagine... Excuse me! That is only on paper." These laws can be changed when it served the interest of the regime he said, adding that it is not like in the UK where you can say whatever you want to say about Tony Blair as long as you can prove it. "In Ethiopia if you write the truth you end up in jail. Kifle Mulat didn't tell you everything; he lost all his 32 teeth in jail."

Mekonnen said 42 of his colleagues at university were sacked, and their professional association has so far been brought to court eight times, on the sixth occasion the verdict of the court was in their favour.

“The amazing thing is that the moment the judges reach such verdicts, they would be removed and a new set of judges would be brought to take up their place,” he said. “The government would then appeal the decision of the first judges and refer the matter again to the same court presided by the newly appointed judges, instead of taking it to a Higher Court, which is supposed to be the case.”

In this way, professional judges have been fired for allegedly being biased he said, asking: “But bias for what? Bias for the truth of course!”

He said most of his colleagues had ended up serving long jail terms while others are axed from employment for simply exercising their rights to demand better conditions of service.

### **Q & A Session**

Asked about how far the British government can go to bring about a change in the state of the free press in Ethiopia given the need to respect the country’s national sovereignty, Mulat said the best place to start is to use the improvement of the situation as a pre-condition for any future aid donations to a country where the regime is killing people on the streets simply for expressing their opinions. Mekonnen wondered how much of such aid money gets to the deserving poor anyway.

Kifle was asked about concrete examples of bruising encounters with the Ethiopian authorities directly related to concerns of public order and state security. He said any accusation of false information or defamation; any article critical of a government minister or high government official; or virtually anything about state corruption quickly qualifies as public order or state security in the eyes of the authorities.

Recounting his personal experience, he said that any reference to the fact that things are getting worse in the country is taken by the authorities to mean a violation of the country’s public order and state security; adding that almost 90 per cent of cases brought against journalists in Ethiopia are justified by these concerns.

“That is why we are fighting against these bad press laws; there is no element of the freedom of expression in the present draft laws regarding the press”, said Mulat.

## ***PANEL TWO: Press Freedom Campaigners: What can be done?***

**Moderator:** Laura Sandys, Chair, Open Democracy

**Speakers:** **Dr Martin Hill**, Horn of Africa Researcher, Amnesty International (AI)  
**Leonard Vincent**, Africa Desk Officer, Reporters Without Borders (RSF)  
**Chris Morley**, President, National Union of Journalists (UK & Ireland)

**Dr Martin Hill** kicked off his contribution by paying tribute to the Exiled Journalists' Network for organising the forum. He said Amnesty International is very supportive of efforts by exiled journalists and refugees in general to improve the human rights situation in their countries of origin. He also praised the efforts of Kifle Mulat, which he said won him many awards, including one given by Bob Geldof who had, ironically, been a colleague of Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi in British Prime Minister Tony Blair's now disbanded Commission for Africa.

He acknowledged the efforts of press freedom campaign organisations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), and Article 19, which have taken the lead in protecting journalists in Ethiopia and other countries in the Horn of Africa by issuing alerts and action appeals, and which have sent missions to the country to improve the capacity of the journalists and argue with the authorities over the press laws. In the spirit of division of labour, he said, AI had left the bulk of the work regarding the problems of free speech with these organisations, although he, like Kifle, recognised the importance of free speech as part of the fundamental human rights.

He regretted that the situation is not getting better in Ethiopia despite the supposed protection that the constitution provides for journalists. He argued that the new press laws are not laws for press freedom, but rather against press freedom. "Changes to the criminal code have also been introduced to make it more difficult for people like Kifle and his association to document arrests of journalists for carrying out their legitimate functions".

The work of AI in Ethiopia has focused more on prison conditions of journalists, other human rights campaigners and opposition politicians, explained Dr Hill. Of these, he says, 76 went on trial in May 2006, and the defendants are on capital charges which carry the death penalty. He said the 14 journalists out of the 76 defendants are not human rights activists or political party members; rather, they are accused of writing press articles, which are the only evidence against them. "They are accused of committing offences about the constitution—outrage against the constitution, and other ridiculous charges such as attempts at genocide; but for all the evidence presented so far against the defendants there is nothing to show the instigation of violence in their writings. That is why we decided to call these journalists and the other activists 'prisoners of conscience'".

Dr Hill was disappointed that efforts by the European Union Observer Mission had achieved little in getting these prisoners released. He said all this was despite AI lobbying governments, UN agencies such as the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, and bringing in teachers' and journalists' associations around the world, academics, lawyers and others. "But the campaigning must continue; new campaigning strategies and new alliances must be built on what is already there to bring about a change in the situation".

**Leonard Vincent** of RSF said to be a democrat is to provide a guarantee to your brother to be able to say what he thinks; is to be able to listen to comments, statements and opinions that you do not necessarily share or that you may consider disturbing.

“It is to fight for the freedom of being criticised; this is our mission,” he said. “So the question we face in dealing with leaders, soldiers or businessmen, is simple: What can we do to help our colleagues and friends...to help Ethiopia come back to light?”

For RSF the answer is simple, he said, because for more than twenty years they have been doing more or less the same thing. He said RSF campaigns for press freedom the world over, but he emphasised that this is made possible with the help of the press, especially the international press.

“Our job is to create crises for the forces of repression and to put forward solutions to solve them; our objective is to force the politicians to change their agenda, and these politicians can be democrats. The crisis in Ethiopia which brings us here makes these two tools more essential. Yet today we have reason to believe that they are not yet effective since our colleagues, our friends have been in prison for almost a year now”.

He said other Ethiopian journalists who continue to brave the situation are constantly in fear of state reprisals. “What can we do now that our proposed solutions have not worked?”

Vincent explained that for their part at RSF, the problem is they do not seem to know their adversaries and that they have only an opinion about what Meles Zenawi and his team think. “We have some ideas of their intentions; but are we sure that we have really understood the meaning of the brutal crackdown of November 2005? We must be clear - all international organisations - beyond our personal convictions, beyond our emotions, we must be able to separate the political from other actions.”

He noted that the mistake made by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is that “He hates us - you Kifle, me and Martin Hill - he hates us; let us don’t make the same mistake. We have the duty not to be driven by our opinions; otherwise our actions would always be seen by the Ethiopian government as the continuous unremitting acts of those, he believes, want to see its downfall.”

He affirmed that getting out of this situation requires joint efforts by all international organisations interested in promoting and upholding the fundamental human rights the world over. “RSF today urges all human rights and press freedom organisations to agree on a common text which would form the basis of our future actions; we are certainly in favour of continuing to inform the world about the scandalous and outrageous state of affairs in Ethiopia today. For that we call on the press, as I said earlier, to show Ethiopia as it has become”.

Vincent hinted that it would be useful to put an action plan on Prime Minister’s table urging him that there cannot be any other outcome except through dialogue with his adversaries and finding common ground. He emphasised the importance of visiting the country to know more, adding that a Committee to Protect Journalists mission went to Ethiopia in March 2006, and

that RSF was planning to send a team to find out more in November 2006 to mark the first anniversary of the notorious crackdown on activists and journalists. He said RSF is determined to engage Prime Minister Meles Zenawi by telling him that “in seeking to solve a problem he has created hundreds of more problems; in seeking to keep power he has only destabilised himself; that in believing that he has struck hard against his own people to ensure national security, he has weakened his country.”

Speaking as a Guest of Honour **Chris Morley**, President of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), said colleagues are facing a truly horrendous situation, adding that the record in Ethiopia is as bad as what you would get anywhere in the world.

“I don’t bring any personal expertise to this discussion but I do feel that it is worth making the point that attacks on media workers are really an attack on society and the people of that society. We should recognise repression wherever it is and that we seek to oppose it. I think one of the ways in which we can do that, as the last speakers put it, is to show the world what is going on in the country through the media”.

He suggested that strategies should be developed where the Western media in particular can be lured into political stories. “I am a working journalist but I know that to get something to the attention of the public you need to have a good story...; but I think there is also the power of organised labour; I think there are important links that can be forged between the trade unions in the West and those in Ethiopia to pile pressure on the regime”.

### **From the floor**

An academic researcher working on asylum and immigration issues urged Ethiopians living in the UK to be more pro-active in engaging the media and policy makers to know what is going on in their country.

Moderator **Laura Sandys** said: “We need a strong story, and we have one. We have both the human story, and also the generic story, about the erosion of press freedom; and also how governments use their powers as well as the issue of national security. We need to use activism in the UK, and also across Europe, but we also need to link that with working in Ethiopia as suggested by Leonard Vincent.”

She emphasised the need to have one common narrative bringing the human interest and legal analysis together, and expressed hope that “we would be able to achieve this by the end of tonight’s discussions.”

**Ngussie Gemma**, President of the Ethiopia Free Press Journalists Support Group in the UK, said democracy and good governance are preconditions for press freedom which means democratic nations in the West must refuse to ally with dictatorial regimes like the one in Ethiopia, whatever it takes. He called on the media in the West to help the free press in Ethiopia to continue working as the voice of the voiceless, not only because they are colleagues but because they share common values of fundamental human rights. He cited many cases of demonstrations by Ethiopians in the UK that were hardly covered by the BBC or other media outlets.

## Q & A Session

Asked whether RSF's planned November visit to Ethiopia is more to engage the government or visit the imprisoned journalists and their relatives, Vincent said the RSF delegation plans to do both—visit the Prime Minister, the lawyers, the ministers concerned, as well as the persecuted, to find a common solution.

He said that the Ethiopian government has been very resistant to UN and other international pressure but stressed the need to welcome all international mechanisms of human rights although some may be slow, and may not have immediate impact.

In his concluding remarks, **Kifle Mulat** called for urgent action by the international community, including the press freedom and human rights campaigners, as he said that time is running out for his colleagues still languishing in prison, most of whom he said are still waiting their turn in court.

## Media Discussion

The Frontline Club, Paddington, London  
Friday 29 October 2006

Moderator: **Keith Bowers**, Frontline Club member and former BBC executive editor

Speakers: **Kifle Mulat**, President of the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association  
**Derbew Temesgen Meshasha**, journalist and human rights lawyer

The Forum moved to the Frontline Club (FC) for an evening session which was an opportunity for the speakers at the SOAS seminar to continue their discussion with members of the British media. Thanks to the facilities provided by the Frontline Forum, Derbew Temesgen Meshasha who had been refused an entry visa to the UK, was able to join the discussion by phone from Addis Ababa.

Reacting to a question from the moderator, **Kifle Mulat** said during the first few years of the Zenawi regime, journalists were okay, but things soon started to nose dive and journalists have paid a heavy price.

“As it stands now there is no free press in Ethiopia; I know some people may want to argue that there are papers that are still coming out but I would say that all of those still coming out are being financed by the government; most of the journalists who are serving as alternative to the people are either in jail or in exile; all the few printing facilities, radios and TV stations are controlled by the government,” he said.

**Derbew Temesgen Meshasha** explained that he had been defending persecuted journalists for the past 15 years. He said that most people believe that 1991 was a landmark for the free press in Ethiopia; it was a departure from the past.

“Following the change of government, many free presses emerged talking about democracy. The issue of public order and state security should have been seen in a balance; the question of balancing order and security on the one hand, and freedom, equality and justice on the other, has been a central question of jurisprudence for ages. I believe that there is a need to strike a balance between the two values so that the opposition, the status quo or the forces of chaos or loyalty may not hijack the peace; that is an important balance that is needed.”

He noted that order and security are values that are very important because without them no development can take place in a country. However he emphasised that security must not be limited to the state but must be extended to the individual as well; individual citizens must be provided with the security they need to exercise their fundamental human rights.

“I think excess in the maintenance of order and security, or in the exercise of freedom, can be most dangerous, and may lead to disorder and anarchy,” he said. “For instance last year I observed excess on the part of the government. You see we have an infant democracy; our press development is very young. I think the government should have been tolerant in this regard so that democracy could further develop and the free press could flourish”.

Asked by the Moderator why he hadn't come to the event in person Meshasha replied: "Oh! I wish I was there to explain this; for reasons I don't know the British embassy here could not grant me a visa. They gave me three reasons in the letter they wrote me to justify their action: That my passport is two weeks old - but they didn't bother to ask me whether I had travelled abroad in the past (I have been all over the world since my school age - USA, Japan, India, Australia etc.); that I don't have any family ties in Ethiopia - but I already told them that I am married with four children; and that I don't own a property in Ethiopia - but I already told them that I own my own dwelling house. In fact what upset me most in their letter is their suggestion that I am going to seek employment and income support".

"How surprised were you that they refused you entry?" the Moderator asked.

Meshasha responded: "I was very surprised to be refused for these reasons - because they should have done their homework well to find out that I am not the type of person who would want to leave outside my country after being all over the place. My belief is that I am born in this great and proud country, and I am ready to die in this same country; I don't want to live outside my country at all".

The telephone link was broken when Derbew began to explain his experience working to help some of the 14 journalists currently in prison.

Picking up from this point, **Dr Martin Hill** from Amnesty International explained that the current big trial in Ethiopia is of people accused of instigating violence and attempted genocide. Most of the imprisoned journalists and activists arrested since November 2005, he said, are refusing to defend themselves because they don't believe they can get a fair trial.

"In fact the trial will resume on 15 October, and I would ask journalists present here to make sure that their papers carry reports of this trial."

Asked by an independent TV journalist why he had decided to leave his country, Mulat said that he, like his friend and lawyer Meshasha, had a family in Ethiopia and had travelled widely (to the USA and Europe) but that he never opted to go into exile until his name was published on 'a most wanted government list' while he was attending an AI conference in Uganda.

The Moderator observed that it was regrettable that no representatives from the Ethiopian government were there. He suggested that had they come there was one key point they would have raised. "They would say that one of the reasons why journalists in this trial are in prison is that they and opposition politicians were trying to stir up a Ukrainian-type 'orange revolution' against the Meles-led government. Their argument would be that, for internal security reasons, they had to keep law and order but that they are still committed to press freedom." He asked **Kifle Mulat** how he would respond to that.

**Mulat** replied that he is happy that nobody from the government side had turned up because if he saw them he would have become very emotional about what they are doing.

“If, as they say, they are interested in democracy why do they raid editorial offices? First of all, all the opposition parties have their own organs; but one thing that I cannot deny is that the journalist has to work for democracy. I can assure you that there is not a single journalist among those in prison who is a member of a political party.

“If they kill innocent civilians, including children demonstrating on the streets, do you think we would write that they are doing a good thing? No. Rather we would write that they are killing innocent people. For example if they put a poor peasant in prison and torture him for not paying his tax, we would write about it. This is what we do but at a heavy price; look at what is happening to our colleague who had a baby in prison; both are still languishing in prison. We are not supporters of any opposition party; we stand for peace, democracy, human rights and prosperity of the Ethiopian people”.

On the question of the attitude of the international community to what has been going on in Ethiopia, **Dr Martin Hill** recognised the role of the European Union in calling for the release of the prisoners of conscience and the creation of a level playing field for journalists and opposition politicians but admitted the UK and the US have yet to do anything to back this initiative. He said there was good coverage of the November 2005 demonstrations by Channel 4 news and other media but that since then coverage has been minimal.

“Looking at all the killings of innocent people and the jailing of journalists and activists, we wish that journalists of media services based in Kenya could have rushed to Ethiopia to cover these human stories and generally expanded international awareness of the violations in the country; but this has not been happening,” he said.

The Moderator asked a former BBC Africa correspondent whether this trial, which also involved the former elected Mayor of Addis Ababa, would mean anything to the BBC domestic service. In reply he was told that in the context of Ethiopia “it is a question of using a trial like that of top individuals to illustrate a broader picture of what is happening in the country; I think that very often that is the most successful way of piecing the story together.”

Fielding a question from the same former BBC correspondent on how Ethiopia’s war with Somalia is being covered domestically, Mulat said the government is merely using that war on so-called terrorists in Somalia to distract attention from the real issues back home.

## **Conclusion: The Ways Forward**

Ten main action points towards a way forward emerged from the discussion over the two days of the first EJM Press Freedom Forum.

1. International pressure must include a direct engagement with the Ethiopian authorities to find a common ground between national security and press freedom in the country.
2. The international media must be more pro-active in putting the Ethiopian human rights situation as it is on the news agenda, and in this way influence public policy for positive change.
3. The empowering of organisations such as EJM, EFJA and others to work more closely with press freedom campaigners in efforts to improve the situation in Ethiopia.
4. The forging of links with labour unions in the West and elsewhere in piling pressure on the Ethiopian government by way of organised labour.
5. The setting up of a support fund to help lawyers who are defending journalists persecuted because of their work.
6. The need for confidence building and partnership between the state and the private media in nation-building, national security and the protection of the peoples' fundamental human rights.
7. Need for tolerance of dissenting views in the true democratic spirit by both the government and opposition.
8. Need for deregulation of the private media and the removal of all state restrictions to the free development of the local press.
9. The provision of more training opportunities for journalists, especially in the area of ethics and media management.
10. The need for the US and UK governments to support in a more concrete way initiatives so far taken by the European Union in calling for an immediate end to the untold human rights violations of the Meles Zenawi regime.

## ETHIOPIA FACT FILE

<b>Official name:</b>	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.
<b>President:</b>	Girma Wolde Giorgis. Elected 2001 by the House of People's Representatives for 6-year term (eligible for a second term).
<b>Prime Minister:</b>	Meles Zenawi (last elected 2005).
<b>Government:</b>	Council of Ministers selected by the Prime Minister and approved by the House of People's Representatives.
<b>Parliament:</b>	Bicameral: House of Federation (upper chamber) has 108 members on 5-year terms chosen by state assemblies); House of People's Representatives (lower chamber) has 547 members directly elected for 5 years by popular vote from single-member districts.
<b>Main political parties:</b>	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, 327 seats); Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD, 109 seats); United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF, 52 seats); Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP, 23 seats); Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM, 11 seats); Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP, 8 seats); Benishangul Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front (BGPDUF, 8 seats); Others (7 seats).
<b>Area:</b>	Over 1 million square kilometres, landlocked and bordered by Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia & Sudan.
<b>Climate:</b>	Tropical.
<b>Terrain:</b>	Mostly mountainous plateaux. Suffers from deforestation; overgrazing; soil erosion; desertification; water shortages.
<b>Produce:</b>	Cattle and grain raised in cool rainy highlands; coffee and cotton in the most densely populated plateau; Ogaden desert inhabited by nomadic shepherds; small reserves of gold, platinum, copper, potash, natural gas, hydropower.
<b>Population:</b>	Approx. 74 million
<b>Capital:</b>	Addis Ababa (2,723,000)
<b>Literacy:</b>	43%
<b>Age structure:</b>	0-14 years: 43.7%; 15-64 years: 53.6%; 65 years and over: 2.7%

<b>Birth rate:</b>	38 per 1,000
<b>Infant mortality:</b>	77 per 1,000
<b>Death rate:</b>	15 per 1,000
<b>HIV prevalence:</b>	41.4% (demographic 7 health survey, 2005)
<b>Life expectancy:</b>	48 (UNICEF, 2004)
<b>Currency:</b>	Birr (100 Birr = US\$11.43; €8.56; GB£5.78 @ November 2006)
<b>Poverty level:</b>	One of the poorest countries in the world (ranked 170/177 in the UN Human Development Report); and estimated 31 million (42%) live on less than half a US dollar a day; 81.9% lived on less than US\$1 per day) 15 million at risk of food insecurity.
<b>Official Language:</b>	Amharic (80 registered languages)
<b>Ethnic groups:</b>	Oromo 40%, Amhara & Tigrayan 32%, Sidamo 9%, Shankella 6%, Somali 6%, Afar 4%, Gurage 2%, other 1%. More than 90 ethnic groups (most with less than 1m people);
<b>Religion:</b>	Muslim 45%-50%, Ethiopian Christian Orthodox 35%-40%, Animist 12%, Other 3%-8%
<b>Refugees (2005):</b>	90,451 (Sudan); 16,470 (Somalia); 8,719 (Eritrea); 132,000 internally displaced people mostly in Tigray & Gambela provinces

Media Journalism in Ethiopia is regulated by Press Proclamation No. 34/1992, under which journalists can be jailed on vague charges such as criminal defamation, incitement to violence, or spreading false information.

Ethiopia is the oldest independent country in Africa.

### **Recent history**

- 1930 Emperor Haile Selassie comes to power.
- 1936 Italian fascists invade (Abyssinia) & overthrows Haile Selassie.
- 1941 British oust the fascists.
- 1948 Selassie returns to power, denounces colonialism and opts for non-alignment and back creation of organisation for African Unity.
- 1974 Selassie overthrown by Armed Forces Co-ordination Committee (The Derg); General Aman Andom proclaims a republic.
- 1976 Scientific Socialism adopted as official ideology; foreign banks, insurance companies and heavy industry nationalised.
- 1977 Marxist Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam comes to power; opposition put down in 'Red Terror' Eritrean, Ogaden and Tigrayan separatist movements active.
- 1979 Ethiopian Workers' Party Organisation Committee (COPWE) established by the government.
- 1982 Lengthy period of drought begins affecting 12 provinces and killing 500,000 over the next few years; Ethiopian Workers' Party (EWP) holds founding congress committed to socialism. The elected Shengo (parliament) proclaims the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia with Mengistu Mariam as head of state; separatist remain active.
- 1989 Attempted military coup put down.

- 1990 EWP changes its name to Ethiopian Democratic Union party (EDUP) and establishes mixed economy.
- 1991 After rebel victories in the north, Mengistu Mariam goes into exile, Vice-President Tesfaye Gabre Kidane negotiates ceasefire with Eritrean separatists then resigns. At Meles Zenawi, leader of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrows the Derg and heads provisional government and promises elections.
- 1992 New Regional Councils elected.
- 1993 Eritrea becomes independent after UN supervised referendum.
- 1994 Temporary Council of Representatives approves constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia based on ethnic federalism; elections for Constituent Assembly boycotted by Oromo and Ogaden Liberation Fronts.
- 1995 Multi-party Parliamentary elections boycotted by most opposition parties. Negasso Gidada becomes President with Meles Zenawi as Prime Minister; privatisation of state companies begins.
- 1996 Abortive assassination attempt on Mengistu.
- 1997 Amnesty International calls for release of opposition members and an end to arbitrary arrests, torture and disappearances.
- 1998 Price hike on basic goods; massive food shortages; border conflict with Eritrea leaves an estimated 100,000 casualties; death penalty reintroduced.
- 1999 War against Eritrea begins again, UN Security Council calls for ceasefire and weapons embargo.
- 2000 Ethiopian troops enter Eritrea and capture 300 rebels. Algiers Peace Agreement establishes Boundary Commission and 25km Temporary Security Zone.
- 2001 UN peacekeeping force begins to police security zone; Girma Wolde Giorgis becomes President.
- 2002 Drought; 12.5 million Ethiopians said to be dependant on food aid; international outrage forces food processing company Nestle's to reduce by 75% its \$6million demand for compensation over 1975 nationalisation; UNICEF claims that up to 200,000 street children are at risk to disease and exploitation; ethnic violence breaks out over local election results; Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ratifies the Ethiopia/Eritrea border; border closed by Ethiopia.
- 2003 Tension builds with Eritrea over border dispute; ethnic violence involving government troops in Gambela region.
- 2004 Student unrest particularly in Oromia region; Government agrees in principle to Boundary Commission recommendations.
- 2005 General election shows growing support for opposition parties. Widespread demonstrations and student unrest leads to severe measures against opposition leaders, protestors and journalists.
- 2006 Serious flooding, affecting 7 of the 9 regions, kills over 600.

**Sources:** The State of the World's Children, UNICEF, 2006  
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 The World Guide, New Internationalist (10<sup>th</sup> edition), 2005/6  
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