

## HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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Federica Mogherini

High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs  
Vice-President of the European Commission  
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Brussels, March 23, 2017

Dear High Representative Mogherini,

Human Rights Watch wishes to express our deep disappointment over the one-sided [statement](#) issued by your office during your official visit to Ethiopia last week. In the public statement of March 17, 2017, you focus only on the important European Union partnerships with Ethiopia on humanitarian assistance, migration, refugees, and economic growth, and reiterate your support for the dialogue with the political opposition currently underway.

In our view the statement was a missed opportunity to state publicly and unequivocally that Ethiopia's repressive response to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly – illustrated by the government's brutal crackdown on protests – is not conducive to Ethiopia's long-term stability or the EU's ability to partner with Ethiopia on areas of mutual interest.

As you are aware, Ethiopia's widespread human rights violations against its citizens means that Ethiopia is a country producing refugees and asylum seekers seeking safety.

Since November 2015 [state security forces have killed hundreds and arrested tens of thousands of protesters](#), plunging Ethiopia into a human rights crisis. A [state of emergency](#), called in October 2016, prescribes sweeping restrictions that go far beyond what is permissible under international law, eliminating what little space there was for the peaceful expression of critical views. The government has detained over 20,000 in "rehabilitation camps" since the state of emergency was declared, according to official figures. Widespread and long-standing restrictions on [media](#) and civil society groups continue to be enforced. Opposition leaders remain in detention on politically motivated charges, including Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) leader Dr. Merera Gudina, who was arrested following his attendance at a briefing on November 9 in Brussels organized by an MEP.

Just three weeks before your visit, he was charged with “outrages against the constitution” and faces up to life in imprisonment.

Harassment through criminal charges, arbitrary detention of political opposition members and supporters, restrictions on financing, and registration problems have decimated opposition parties since the 2010 election. Actual or perceived members of opposition parties have difficulty accessing the benefits of development and humanitarian assistance, including that provided by the EU and its member states. This partisan system ensures that Ethiopians in rural or drought-vulnerable areas of the country are dependent on the government, bolstered by EU support, for their livelihoods, food aid, employment, and health care. This further constricts the space for political expression, dialogue and further undermines the effectiveness of opposition parties. From the government’s perspective, the strategy has been successful -- the ruling party and its affiliates won 100 percent of the seats in federal parliament in 2015 despite strong anti-government sentiments in many parts of the country as the protests would later illustrate.

Dismantling opposition parties, imprisoning critical opposition voices, and then inviting whomever remains to engage in a dialogue is not the “right direction,” as your statement said. Nor is having such a dialogue in the shadow of a state of emergency with wide-ranging restrictions on free expression rights. Moderate, yet still critical opposition voices, including Dr. Merera, should be part of any credible dialogue with the opposition, and this should have been stressed privately and publicly to the prime minister as critical for any meaningful dialogue. Your expression of support for political dialogue without acknowledging the systematic destruction of legally registered opposition parties and the suppression of basic human rights is not constructive to the EU’s partnership with Ethiopia.

Discussing economic partnerships during the state of emergency that followed 18 months of brutality partly triggered by the government’s abusive economic development approach illustrates our concern with your recent statement. The Ethiopian government has ignored the rights of those displaced by investment projects, failing to properly consult and compensate them. It begs the question: what policies or safeguards is the EU insisting are in place to ensure that economic development occurs with professed EU commitments to human rights respected?

In this light, the EU-Ethiopia Business Forum should be postponed until the abusive provisions of the state of emergency are lifted. Moreover, the government should make progress on implementing reforms that are crucial for a rights-respecting business environment, such as the repeal or substantial amendment of the Charities and Societies Proclamation.

The contrast between recent statements by the European parliament and the European Union could not be more stark. Parliament has consistently issued strong statements about the

government's brutal crackdown, including a [resolution](#) adopted in January 2016 that stated "respect for human rights and the rule of law are crucial to the EU's policies to promote development in Ethiopia." The resolution also stressed that the "EU should measure its financial support according to the country's human rights record and the degree to which the Ethiopian Government promotes reforms towards democratization." [Parliamentary subcommittee hearings](#) on Ethiopia followed in October. European Parliament actions signaled to the Ethiopian government and its people that there are repercussions for brutality against their own citizens – brutality that undermines European priorities in the Horn of Africa.

In contrast, [the EU's tepid approach](#), epitomized by your recent statement merely sends the message to the Ethiopian government that its repression and brutality carries no consequences or public condemnation from its most trusted friends, donors, and partners.

As all recognize, Ethiopia is an important partner of the EU in the areas of migration, development and economic growth. But these partnerships are dependent on long-term stability in Ethiopia and, thus, should be dependent on respect for basic human rights.

A further downward spiral in the human rights situation in this country of 100 million people could lead to dramatically increased humanitarian needs and out-migration from Ethiopia, all of which would contravene European and Ethiopian interests. This is where the EU's focus should be.

We strongly urge you to use future meetings with Ethiopia's leadership to publicly and unequivocally call for the release of key opposition leaders such as Dr. Merera and [Bekele Gerba](#), the lifting of abusive provisions of the state of emergency, [an international investigation](#) into the crackdown on government protests, and the repeal of longstanding restrictions on media and civil society. And as stated in the European parliament resolution, it would be beneficial to clarify what progress on human rights you expect from Ethiopia to maintain ongoing EU support. The European Union's interests in Ethiopia are best served by taking a principled stance on the importance of human rights protections.

Kind regards,

Lotte Leicht  
EU Director  
Human Rights Watch

CC:

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