

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Ref.: AL ETH 2/2025
(Please use this reference in your reply)

13 February 2025

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 52/4 and 50/17.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning the **alarming rise at the end of 2024 in the cases of suspension of civil society organizations in Ethiopia**, including of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center, the Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy, Lawyers for Human Rights, and the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia, by the Authority for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO).

The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) is a non-governmental human rights group in Ethiopia. Since its inception in October 1991, EHRCO has been engaged in the provision of human rights education and training for the public and members of the government at all levels. It also conducts human rights-related studies and research, disseminate results, and provides legal aid to victims of human rights violations.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC) was established in December 2019 and has been working since then on building the capacity and ensuring the safety, security and well-being of human rights defenders, by supporting them in carrying out their work.

The Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD) is a non-profit organization that has been working since 2019 on the protection of human rights, democratization and the culture of non-violence through advocacy, training and research activities, and by empowering individuals and communities to meaningfully participate in democratic processes and claim their rights.

Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) is a civil society organization established by lawyers aiming to achieve a better protection of human rights in Ethiopia. They do this by empowering lawyers with knowledge and skills, increasing their role in the promotion and protection of human rights, supporting vulnerable groups and remedying human rights violations through strategic litigation.

The Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE) is a non-governmental organization dedicated to the advancement of the protection of human rights in Ethiopia. They provide support to the work of Ethiopian human rights defenders through advocacy and other related activities.

Special Procedures mandate holders previously raised concern about reported restrictions to the right to freedom of association in Ethiopia in communications ETH 6/2011 and ETH 6/2012. We regret not receiving a reply from your Excellency's Government to these communications.

According to the information received:

On 23 December 2024, ACSO, the governmental body that deals with the registration and activities of civil society organizations operating in Ethiopia, suspended the functioning of two prominent civil society organizations, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC), based on the allegation that the organizations engage in activities "beyond their stated objectives" and "against national interests", violating "their obligation to operate independently from political involvement".

The suspension of EHRCO and EHRDC followed the suspension on 14 and 22 November 2024 of three other civil society organizations, the Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD), the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE) and Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR), by the same government agency, which reportedly informed them by phone and/or through a letter. The suspension was ordered with immediate effect based on the allegation that the organizations were engaged in activities lacking political impartiality and that were against national interests.

This happened some days after AHRE, CARD and LHR became signatories to a public letter condemning the government's proposed amendment to the Ethiopian Mass Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021, which reportedly proposed increased oversight of the media by the Office of the Prime Minister.

The suspension of CARD and LHR was reportedly lifted on 12 December 2024. However, the two human rights organizations were then re-suspended on 18 December 2024. According to ACSO, they did not comply with the authority's regulations following their first suspension.

The suspensions of the civil society organizations took place despite their reported efforts to engage with ACSO staff and their timely submission of the required financial reports to the authorities. The information suggests that the suspensions are causing severe legal restrictions for the organizations to operate in the country, including because of the reported freezing of their bank accounts, which affects their operational viability making them unable to pay the salaries of their staff. Procedural irregularities, including a lack of transparency and prior warning, and the alleged failure to conduct a proper investigation on the allegations that led to the suspension of the organizations were also reported.

Reportedly, civil society organizations in Ethiopia and their staff have been facing increasing pressure, intimidation and harassment, and no new human rights organizations has been registered by ACSO since August 2023.

While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of the information received, we wish to express serious concern about the alarming increase in the cases of suspension of civil society organizations by ACSO, reportedly without prior notice and without following due legal procedures and standards. We fear that this measure might be linked to their human rights activities and might have implications on the wider civil society in Ethiopia, jeopardizing the effective and independent functioning of human rights organizations and hindering their right to freedom of association as well as their ability to conduct human rights work freely, without fear of intimidation or reprisals. We further note that the suspension might impact on the enjoyment of human rights in the country, as it might no longer be possible to count on the support of several civil society organizations in cases of human rights violations.

We acknowledge the efforts undertaken by your Excellency's Government in the field of freedom of association by adopting the Civil Societies Proclamation No. 1113/2019 in 2019. We call upon your Excellency's government to ensure that the law is effectively implemented in line with international human rights standards by providing a strong and secure civic space in the country with no undue targeting of civil society organizations for their legitimate human rights activities.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide detailed information on the factual and legal basis for the restrictions placed on the civil society organizations, explaining how this is consistent with your Excellency's Government obligations under international human rights law, in particular with regards to the right to freedom of association.
3. Please provide the details, and where available the results, of any investigation or other inquiries which may have been carried out in relation to the allegations made against the civil society organizations leading to their suspension. If no inquiries have taken place, or if they have been inconclusive, please explain why.
4. Please indicate what measures have been put in place by your Excellency's Government to ensure that civil society organizations can carry out their legitimate work free from fear of harassment or retaliation of any sort and without undue interference with their human rights activities.

This communication and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be

presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we call for proper, speedy and independent investigations, and in case the allegations that led to the suspension of the civil society organizations prove to be untrue, we urge your Excellency's Government to revoke the decision to suspend the activities of the civil society organizations and ensure they can immediately return to their regular functioning and continue their human rights work without any repercussions.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Mary Lawlor

Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Gina Romero

Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, we would like draw the attention of your Excellency's Government to the right to article 22(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by Ethiopia on 11 June 1993, which provides that "everyone shall have the right to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests". Article 22(2) of the ICCPR further states that "no restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those which are prescribed by law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (ordre public), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others". The right to freedom of association is also set forth in article 20(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which provides that "everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association".

The Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association indicated that "[t]he suspension and the involuntarily dissolution of an association are the severest types of restrictions on freedom of association. As a result, it should only be possible when there is a clear and imminent danger resulting in a flagrant violation of national law, in compliance with international human rights law. It should be strictly proportional to the legitimate aim pursued and used only when softer measures would be insufficient" (A/HRC/20/27, para. 75).

We also would like to draw the attention of your Excellency's Government to the fundamental principles set forth in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and in particular articles 1 and 2, which state that "everyone has the right individually or in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels" and that "each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms, inter alia, by adopting such steps as may be necessary to create all conditions necessary in the social, economic, political and other fields, as well as the legal guarantees required to ensure that all persons under its jurisdiction, individually and in association with others, are able to enjoy all those rights and freedoms in practice".

Furthermore, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government the following provisions of the Declaration:

- article 1 which states that "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels".
- article 5(b) which provide that "for the purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, everyone has the

right, individually and in association with others...to form, join and participate in non-governmental organizations, associations or groups”.

- article 13 which stipulates that “everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to solicit, receive and utilize resources for the express purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedom, through peaceful means, in accordance with article 3 of the Declaration”.

Lastly, on this matter, we would also like to bring to the notice of your Excellency’s Government the Human Rights Council resolution 50/17, and in particular operative paragraph 9 that “calls upon States to establish and maintain a safe and enabling environment in which civil society actors can operate freely, including by fostering and facilitating their access to financial resources, to ensure that national legislation, policies and practices are in compliance with their international human rights obligations and commitments, and to refrain from applying laws and engaging in practices that unduly interfere with their ability to do so, including with regard to their ability to access funding”.