



LAWYERS COMMITTEE  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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His Excellency Wored-Wold Wolde  
Minister of Justice  
PO Box 1370  
Addis Ababa  
Ethiopia

October 16, 2001

Dear Minister,

On behalf of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, I would like to express serious concern about the recent suspension of the operations of the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA). The Lawyers Committee is a U.S.-based, independent non-governmental human rights organization, which promotes the work of human rights defenders throughout the world and seeks to ensure their free and effective functioning, in accordance with international human rights law. The work of the EWLA is of value to the protection and promotion of the rights of women in Ethiopia and its activities should therefore be encouraged and supported, rather than restricted.

According to reports received by the Lawyers Committee, at the beginning of September 2001, the Ministry of Justice suspended the EWLA's licence on the grounds that the organisation was engaged in activities falling outside its established objectives. Its bank account has also been frozen, rendering it unable to continue with its ongoing projects and campaigns. Detailed reasons for this action by the Ministry have not been provided, nor the nature of the prohibited activities engaged in by the EWLA specified.

The EWLA was created in 1995 in order to defend the rights of women and girls, in particular by providing legal services to those subjected to domestic and other forms of violence. It has also engaged in advocacy efforts to improve Ethiopian legislation and government practices with regard to women's equality and protection. There have been no reports that the EWLA has been involved in any unlawful activity and it has worked successfully with several international organisations, as well as the Ethiopian government.

Under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)* and the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*, all persons have the right to freedom of association. Restrictions

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on freedom of association are only permitted insofar as these are prescribed by law and “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.” [ICCPR, article 22] The scope of permissible restrictions on freedom of association is therefore very limited. Moreover, where the association in question is a non-governmental organisation devoted to the protection and promotion of human rights, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1998)* is applicable.

Article 1 of the Declaration provides 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.” As part of this right, the Declaration also specifies that everyone has the right to form, join and participate in non-governmental organizations. Such organizations must be afforded the right to gather and disseminate information about human rights issues and practices and are entitled to freely criticise the policies and practices of governments, without adverse consequences. [Declaration, articles 6 and 8.] Individuals and organizations also have the right “to participate in peaceful activities against violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms” and must be protected by the State from retaliation as a result of their actions to promote human rights. [Declaration, article 12.]

In addition to its obligations under the ICCPR and the African Charter, the government of Ethiopia should act in accordance with the prescriptions contained in the Declaration with regard to its treatment of all human rights non-governmental organizations, including the EWLA. Before suspending the EWLA’s licence, an extremely severe interference in its functioning, the government should have given the organization notice of any activities it considered to be in violation of its mandate and allowed it to respond, or end these particular activities. We therefore call upon you to reinstate the EWLA’s licence and remove the freeze on its bank account immediately.

We would appreciate any timely information concerning measures taken by you to address our concerns in this matter and thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Neil Hicks  
Director of Protection

Cc: Afewok Ghilay  
Head, Associations Registration Office  
Ministry of Justice  
Addis Ababa

Ethiopia