

Ethiopia's terror conviction of journalist raises doubts on free speech

Ethiopia conviction of journalist Eskinder Nega for covering planned protests sparks international condemnation. US Sen. Patrick Leahy suggests cutback in aid to Ethiopia.

By William Davison, *Correspondent* / June 27, 2012

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

Dissident Ethiopian writer Eskinder Nega was today convicted of conspiring to commit acts of terror, sparking an outpouring of international condemnation.

The eloquent, long-standing critic of the Ethiopia Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front's rule – who has also been jailed at least seven times – was awarded the PEN American Center Freedom to Write prize last month. PEN called today's verdict demonstrated a "shameful disdain for Ethiopia's obligations to its citizens and to international law."

Judges at the Federal High Court found Mr. Eskinder – along with 23 other activists and writers – guilty of being involved in plotting a violent revolt. Supporters say his actual crime was voicing pro-democracy views and discussing the possibility of peaceful protests in the wake of the Arab Spring.

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Supporters include US Sen. Patrick Leahy (D) of Vermont, who wants at least \$500,000 of existing American aid to Ethiopia's military next year to be potentially withheld, depending on whether the Ethiopian government respects press freedom.

"That means enabling journalists like Eskinder Nega to do their work of reporting and peaceful political participation," he said in a congressional statement on June 14.

The conditions in the bill, expected to become law, also press Ethiopia to protect judicial independence and a host of other human rights.

Despite these moves, Eskinder's conviction is just one indication that there will be little change of course from Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's government, which relies heavily on up to \$3 billion of Western aid a year in its much-lauded mission to improve health and education.

"The net result of the legislation's passage would be to annoy the current Ethiopian government without really pressuring it," says J. Peter Pham, director of the Michael S. Ansari Africa Center at the Atlantic Council. There is no substance to the conditions and the sole consequence will be denying young Ethiopian military officers a chance to be educated at a US university, he says.
Stifling effect on media

For remaining independent Ethiopian journalists, the message is clear.

One leading local writer doesn't answer phone calls from abroad any more, unless it's family calling: Contact with banned organizations based outside the Horn of Africa countries was part of the evidence used to prosecute other local journalists this year under a 2009 anti-terrorism law. Officials insist media work was a front for subversive activities.

Reeyot Alemu, an occasional columnist for one of the last bastions of dissent, Fiteh newspaper, was sentenced in January to 14 years in jail. Evidence used against her included e-mails sent to the Ethiopian Review website about anti-government slogans.

Frustrating to the government

In some cases, such as that of Ethiopian Review, it's apparent why official frustration at the media boils over.