



Congressman Donald Payne

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For Immediate Release
January 9, 2009

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Payne Calls for the Immediate Release of Ethiopian Political Prisoners

Washington, DC – Congressman Donald M. Payne, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health, issued the following statement today:

“I am concerned over the continued targeting and imprisonment of innocent civilians by the Ethiopian government.

Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, one of the most prominent political leaders and a staunch human rights advocate, has been imprisoned for the second time by the Ethiopian government. Ms. Mideksa, a freedom fighter and a courageous leader, has faced untold suffering over the past several years.

I first met Ms. Mideksa in Kality prison in 2006. Ms. Birtukan Mideksa is on a hunger strike and unfortunately has been separated from her young child.

In October 2007, shortly after her release from prison, Ms. Mideksa stated in a testimony before my subcommittee that, ‘The period immediately preceding the May 2005 elections was an extraordinary time in Ethiopia’s history. For the first time in Ethiopia’s history, the seeds of democracy were planted throughout the land, and on May 15th, Ethiopians came out by the millions to harvest a bounty of democracy.’

Unfortunately, instead of democracy, 193 Ethiopian civilians were killed and many more injured by Ethiopian security forces in demonstrations following the May 2005 elections. Additionally, more than 10,000 people were detained in the aftermath of the elections. According to the Independent Commission of Inquiry, the government used excessive force against civilians.

Ms. Birtukan also said in her testimony that, ‘...the most basic agreement we reached with the Elders to secure our release was nullified and used by the government for mind-numbing propaganda to isolate the CUDP [the Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party] from the public and to instill fear in the public so that it will refrain from supporting the party.’ In her concluding remarks, Ms. Birtukan powerfully stated, ‘It will not be easy for all of us to confront the past. We must try embracing the rule of law and respect for human rights and democracy. The time is ripe for democratization in Ethiopia.’

I strongly urge the Government of Ethiopia to immediately release Ms. Birtukan Mideksa and other political prisoners, open the political space, and respect the rule of law. I will work closely with the incoming Obama Administration to ensure respect for human rights, regional stability, and the promotion of democracy in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government must realize that brutality and repression will never succeed in crushing the aspiration for democracy and freedom. Either one must embrace democracy and rule of law or face the same fate of the Mengistu’s of this world.”