

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 13, 2021

His Excellency Abiy Ahmed
Prime Minister
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Lorenzo Te'azaz Road
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Dear Prime Minister Abiy:

We are writing to convey our deep concern with the recent erosion of press freedom in Ethiopia. Over the last few months, the Ethiopian government has increasingly engaged in a pattern of intimidation against journalists. This trend stands in stark contrast to how your premiership began, when your government commendably reversed the behavior of its predecessors by releasing scores of detained journalists, among other major reforms, to demonstrate the beginning of a more democratic era in Ethiopia. We urge you to return to that path by immediately releasing all journalists in detention and taking concrete steps to protect press freedom.

According to the Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ), at least seven journalists were jailed last year for their work in Ethiopia, compared to just one in 2019 and zero in 2018. Six of these journalists were imprisoned in November 2020 in connection to their coverage of the armed conflict in the Tigray region. Most of them are accused of crimes against the government, incitement, or disseminating false news, yet authorities have repeatedly extended their detention in order to investigate, without producing evidence. In late December, a Reuters cameraman was arrested and detained without charge for 12 days. This arrest followed the reported beating of another Reuters photographer by two Ethiopian federal police officers earlier this month. And earlier this year, Ethiopian authorities shut down internet access throughout the country amid political protests and imposed a communications blackout in Tigray during the government's military operations in the region, which has still not been fully lifted

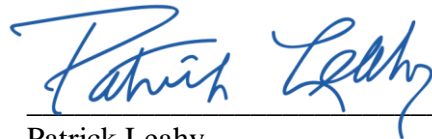
These draconian tactics are a relic of Ethiopia's undemocratic past, when internet shutdowns and employing anti-terror laws to silence journalists were commonplace. Ethiopia was one of the most-censored countries in the world and one of the worst jailers of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa, but under your leadership the country has gone through dramatic reforms since 2018. In 2018, for the first time in 14 years, CPJ recorded no journalists behind bars in its annual census. The country ended its block of over 260 websites and ban on media outlets forced to work in exile. In recognition of these achievements, the international community gathered in Ethiopia in May to celebrate World Press Freedom Day.

With this spate of arrests of journalists and return to using the anti-terrorism law against the free press, Ethiopia risks a reversion to its undemocratic past. Press freedom is a hallmark of democracy, and journalists must be allowed to report the news in the public interest without fear of harassment or harm. We urge you to immediately and unconditionally release all journalists in detention in Ethiopia, to refrain from abusing the legal process to retaliate against journalists, and to ensure the free flow of information in all of Ethiopia. We support Ethiopia's democratic progress, and press freedom must be protected to ensure its success.


Sincerely,



Christopher S. Murphy



Patrick Leahy



Benjamin L. Cardin