



## Peace First!!

### **A New Year's Peace Call by Members of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Peace, Justice and Accountability**

September 2024/Meskerem 2017

Our group of Ethiopian civil society organizations have made annual peace calls every New Year for the last three years, in our advocacy for the respect of human rights and for a wider political space. While there have been encouraging measures in the last year, including the commencement of a Transitional Justice process, a wider reach for humanitarian support and significant strides in the National Dialogue process, we also note that there are a number of issues that didn't get enough attention. For instance:

According to a report by ACLED (2024), there have been 1792 incidences of violence in the country in the past Ethiopian year, leading to 6,164 reported deaths, at an average rate of 560 deaths caused by conflict per month. Beyond the violent deaths and disability of civilians, we note an increasing trend of sexual violence against women and children as a weapon of conflict in addition to large-scale displacement, an infringement on the freedom of movement, arbitrary detention, forced disappearances and kidnappings, in addition to a general sense of insecurity experienced by citizens due to sustained conflict between armed forces in many parts of the country. Wide-scale damage sustained by schools and health centers in conflict-affected areas, and particularly in Oromia and in Amhara, have exacerbated suffering, and resulted in many children's deprivation of educational opportunities.

A steep rise in the cost of living, caused partly by ongoing conflicts, has been one of the most distressing trends of Ethiopian year 2016. Conflict-affected areas and particularly Amhara Region have endured a ten-month long state of emergency including an internet ban, resulting in a sharp increase in human rights violations that have included the arbitrary arrest and inhumane treatment of journalists and human rights activists as well as of politicians and even Members of Parliament. We can already see the impact of an increasing rise in authoritarianism on the shrinking of the civic space, and we note the dangers posed to a democratic social order based on the respect of human rights. Civil Society organizations have faced increasing pressure to stop their investigation and advocacy work.

Therefore, as we welcome 2017, we implore all stakeholders to give peace a chance, to consider the halt of all armed conflicts and the ever-expanding state of lawlessness and human rights abuse and in particular, the sexual violence experienced by women and children. In order to sow the seeds of justice and accountability in 2017, we make the following recommendations.

#### ✿ Pursuit of Peace, Foremost

We recognize that in the absence of peace and within a milieu of myriad crises, it would be impossible to ensure the rule of law and to address widespread crimes. We also recognize the futility of the much-touted processes of transitional justice and the national dialogue if the various conflicts in the country are not halted.

We hereby call on the government to continue pursuing all available avenues to hold talks with armed groups, and to replace single-handed and drastic measures with inclusive and transparent dialogues. In this regard, our collective of civil society organizations pledges to host an inclusive national peace conference in 2017 as our contribution to the ongoing efforts to bring about peace.

#### ✿ Continue the Efforts to Resolve Conflicts

We recognize our country's long history of conflict as a means to resolve political differences and the demands for rights. We note our traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution and for negotiation when we appeal to all groups bearing arms to give a serious chance to the resolution of conflicts through dialogue and negotiation.

#### ✿ Justice and Accountability

Our current state of lawlessness and the prevalence of injustice is leading to a serious erosion of accountability and a rise in mob justice, the restriction of citizens' freedom of movement, corruption, and weakened governance. The fractured system of accountability has enabled state and non-state actors to escape accountability in instances of serious crimes of sexualized violence, murder, kidnappings and forced disappearances as well as citizens' displacement through the ongoing measures of the development policy of the government. Duty bearers who currently do not face accountability include security and justice personnel, and we call for sweeping measures of investigation into the breach of human rights principles, and for putting accountability into place.

#### ✿ Focus on Sexualized Violence

In the last three years of heightened violence, we have witnessed the expanded use of sexual violence as a means for revenge and as a weapon of conflict while the few existing means of protecting women from violence have been eroded. The violence experienced by women within and out of a conflict setting include a rise in rape and in gang-rape, child marriage, female genital cutting and other tradition-sanctioned forms of violence.

As civil society organizations who have worked on the issue of sexual violence for many years, we believe that the justice system is failing survivors by placing the burden of proof on survivors, and by creating room for ever worsening forms of violence. As sexual violence spreads, Ethiopia faces a rollback in the gains made to improve citizens' life outcomes, and we call for a redirection of focus on the national emergency

of sexual violence. We also call on the government to adopt the draft national policy against gender-based violence.

### ✿ Protection of the Civic Space

We note in the past three years a rapid erosion of the legal and institutional changes engendered by the Political Reform. The arbitrary arrest of politicians, human rights defenders, journalists and activists is a direct assault on the rights of civilians to access information, for free speech and of assembly. We note this decline in the rule of law to directly impact our hopes for a democratic social order, and to make a peaceful resolution of conflicts less likely. We therefore implore the government to protect the civic space in recognition of its vitality for peace, justice and accountability. We also ask the government to extend its protection, and to respect the rights of civil society organizations, media personnel, activists and all political actors.

In summary, we, the undersigned members of Ethiopian civil society organizations envision and commit to work towards a year of resolutions of conflict, of steps taken towards justice and accountability including in sexual violence crimes, the respect of human rights and the protection of vulnerable groups in all parts of Ethiopia.

Happy New Year!

We are:

1. Lawyers for Human Rights
2. Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center
3. Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy
4. Setawee
5. Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia
6. Network of Ethiopian Women Association
7. Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA)
8. Ethiopian Women Rights Advocate (EWRA)
9. East African Initiative for Change (I4C)
10. Ethiopian Labor Rights Watch
11. TIMRAN
12. Ethiopian Human Rights Council.