A Joint Statement by Local Human Rights Organizations

June 21, 2024

Introduction:

We, the underscored local human rights organizations, are legally established as well as currently operating in Ethiopia with focus on human rights, the rule of the law, democratic order, and peace building, strategic human rights advocacy, the human rights protection of vulnerable groups, and other human rights fields. Our individual and joint efforts have had significant contributions to improving the current human rights *situation* in the country, and we continue to actively contribute to this cause.

The government is repeatedly attacking and exerting pressures on some of our civil associations, particularly those of us who are operating on human rights. We identify serious gaps found within human rights protection in the country and ardently advocate in terms of highlighting those issues often requesting corrective measures. These pressures are sometimes manifested in laws, policies, and procedures. Over time, these attacks and severe pressures have led to the shrinking of civil space. Following suit, over the past few days, whilst we support press releases and calls of some international and local human rights organizations, granted the gravity of the seriousness of the situation, we have been forced to jointly voice our concerns as well.

As such, these state-imposed prohibitions, pressures, and attacks are not subsiding instead, they are intensifying. As organizations operating within the sector, we are increasingly concerned. The dynamic nature, features, and intensity of these pressures indicate that the once hoped-for civic space is regressing into a quagmire.

Thus, through this joint statement, although it is difficult to capture the state-imposed attacks and severe pressure on human rights organizations in great detail, we will highlight key instances that can be regarded as the main pressures.

Attacks and Pressures being committed:

- Severe intimidation, threats, and pressures continue to be committed against some of our organizations' leaders, board members, and staff.
- There have been repeated unlawful and arbitrary arrests of human rights defenders, particularly targeting some leaders and staff within the organizations that are part of this joint statement. A notable example is the recurrent attack on EHRCO's investigation staff such as the unlawful arrest of the organization's four human rights investigation experts on January 5, 2023.
- The office break-in and robbery at two civil association offices working on human rights have been particularly concerning and startling events. The persistent office break-ins (raid) and targeted robbery of properties is similarly instigated against media institutions, has made us not to discount the act as a petty crime. A case in point, the office break-in committed against EHRCO's Investigation Department on February 11, 2023, and the Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD) on October 10, 2022, which have highlighted our concern. Such measures of violence and the pattern and feature of the events have compelled us to think of the attack as an intentional act directed against human rights organizations. As of the time of this report, the perpetrators are unidentified, and properties are yet to be returned indicating that the government is not providing adequate protection for institutions within the sector.
- We are concerned by the severe mistreatment, strict inspection, threats, and intimidation being committed against some leaders and staff working in some human rights organizations party to the joint statement, during their departure and return from international human rights advocacy work travels, meetings, and training. A case in point is the increasing mistreatment being committed against EHRCO's leaders.

- We are deeply concerned that our individual and joint press releases which are based on our human rights monitoring, investigation, and verification work, and which including recommendations *addressing* defects and gaps, as well as calls for peace, often receive negative responses from the government. Following our press releases, the undue measures of security forces, including the prohibition made on the meeting called by civil associations for a peace call on September 6, 2022, and the blatant threats and intimidations committed against civil associations who were signatories of this joint peace call, as well as sometimes, threats to sue and other pressures and severely damaging the civic space. Furthermore, our organizations have experienced occasional suspensions of meetings and various training as well as disruptions which are hindering us from doing our work freely.
- Human rights advocacy is one of the myriads of our civil associations work. Whilst we are facing prohibition of information and permission from various governmental bodies, this is imposing pressure strategically upon our work. Similarly, the repeatedly heard "we will close you" threats of different governmental officials on various platforms and meetings, have become an impediment for us in terms of preventing other stakeholders within the government structure from working with us and getting cooperation.
- Recently, there has been serious escalation of threats, intimidation, follow-up, digital attack, threats to close offices, threats to sue and unlawful arrest, threats from government and security forces as well as intelligence officers including vists of residences and workplace as well as follow-up and myriad other attacks and pressures are intensifying. These measures are a significant impediment against our capacity to do our work *via* our full potential. And we are seriously concerned that this attack and pressure is increasing from time to time.

- **Joint Call:**
- For all governmental bodies, by considering the direct or indirect attacks and severe pressure vis-a-vis human rights advocates, civil associations, and staff party

to this joint statement, to make actors committing the aforementioned illegal acts legally accountable, and to grant civil associations due protection as well as to ensure the rule of the law;

- For the government, to enable human rights defenders, and human rights-based civil associations to do their work without fear via establishing suitable legal and policy frameworks, to curtail the attack on the civic space;
- We call for national, continental, and international human rights institutions and other stakeholders, by underscoring the seriousness of the attack and severe pressure being imposed on human rights advocates and human-rights-based civil associations, to strengthen their support and protection vis-a-vis human rights defending civil associations and to fulfill their responsibility in regards to the seizure of attacks and serious pressures being committed.

- **Signatory Civil Society Organizations to the Joint Statement:**

1. Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO),
2. Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC),
3. Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR),
4. Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD),
5. Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations (CEHRO),
6. Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE),
7. Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA),
8. SETAWEET,
9. TIMRAN,
10. MIZAN Young Lawyers Center,
11. Vision Ethiopia Congress for Democracy (VECOD), and
12. Center for Democracy and Human Rights.