

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HJM 4031

As Passed House:
February 14, 2008

Brief Description: Requesting that Congress and the President demand Ethiopia fulfill its human rights obligations.

Sponsors: By Representatives Santos, Pettigrew and Kenney.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

State Government & Tribal Affairs: 2/4/08, 2/5/08 [DP].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 2/14/08, 93-1.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Prays to Congress and the President of the United States to demand the Ethiopian government release all political prisoners and journalists and fulfill its human rights obligations.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT & TRIBAL AFFAIRS

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 8 members: Representatives Hunt, Chair; Appleton, Vice Chair; Chandler, Ranking Minority Member; Armstrong, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Kretz, Lias, Miloscia and Ormsby.

Staff: Marsha Reilly (786-7135).

Background:

On May 15, 2005, Ethiopia held general elections for seats in both its national and in four regional government councils. The elections and results were observed by the European Union and the Carter Center. While early election reports indicated that opposition parties were sweeping the election, ensuing reports declared the ruling party won the election and retained control of Parliament.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Demonstrations over the election broke out throughout Ethiopia. Government reports indicated there had been more than 60,000 arrests, with 42 deaths. However, according to a 10-member public inquiry commission report, 193 civilians had been killed and 763 were seriously injured during the protests.

Since the 2005 elections, arrests of political dissenters, journalists, human rights defenders, and civic leaders have been reported, as well as widespread announcements of human rights violations.

Summary of Bill:

The Legislature prays that Congress and the President of the United States demand that the Ethiopian government immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners and journalists and fulfill its obligations under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is resolved that the Washington State Legislature condemns the widespread human rights violations in Ethiopia. It is further resolved that the U.S. Government:

- work to secure the release of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, monitor prison treatment, and demand disclosure of detained political prisoners and that these prisoners be treated humanely;
- demand that the Ethiopian government not interfere in the exercise of rights to freedom of opinion, expression, and association;
- work with the United Nations to establish an independent international commission of inquiry to investigate human rights abuses in Ethiopia;
- demand resumption of the process of reform and improvement of democratic institutions;
- encourage and support the African Human Rights Commission and its member state to investigate and report on human rights violations;
- demand that the Ethiopian government prosecute those responsible for the 193 deaths of protesters and those injured as a result of the use of deadly force by government security forces; and
- demand that the Ethiopian government implement measures to ensure the independence of the judiciary due process.

It is further resolved that Congress adopt a resolution on the human rights situation in Ethiopia and pass "The Ethiopia Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2006."

It is further resolved that copies of this Memorial be transmitted to the President and Vice President of the United States, the Senate Majority Leader, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and each member of Congress from the State of Washington.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) In 2005 election fraud triggered massive human rights violations in that country and millions have been displaced. More than 20,000 Ethiopians and Ethiopia-Americans work and live in the greater Seattle area and have brought this issue forward. The regime in power has suspended all basic human rights including, but not limited to, freedom of assembly and freedom of press, except those that are solely-owned by the government and its agents. The atrocities taking place go unchecked, are indiscriminate and have received the attention of international human rights organizations and other countries, including in the United States. House Resolution 2003, the Ethiopia Democracy and Accountability Act, passed the House of Representatives and is awaiting introduction in the Senate. The resolution supports the establishment of democratic institutions in Ethiopia to safeguard human rights. Please ask Congress to expedite passage of that resolution so that eventually justice will be delivered.

(Opposed) Over the last 50 years, the United States has been trying to tell other countries to reform and it has not done any good. Instead, the United States is vilified. Is war the only way to stop these human rights violations?

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Santos, prime sponsor.

(Opposed) Tom Bandt.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.