

**Mr. Walter Isaacson, BBG Chairman**

**Mr. Richard M. Lobo, IBB Director**

**Mr. Steve Redisch, VOA Acting Director/ Executive Editor,**

**Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG)**

**330 Independence Avenue, SW**

**Washington, DC 20237**

July 25, 2011

Dear Sirs,

First of all, we, members of the Ethiopian American community, would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the People and Government of the United States for being the leading defender of freedom, justice and democracy throughout the world. We greatly appreciate and admire the crucial works of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, whose mission is “to promote freedom and democracy and to enhance understanding through multi-media communication of accurate, objective, and balanced news, information, and other programming about America and the world audience overseas.”

We are writing today to request an investigation into reports of censorship at the Voice of America Horn of Africa section, which has been serving Ethiopians as the only powerful source of uncensored news and views. What is more worrying is the fact that the difficulties facing the VOA Horn of Africa section transpired after the Meles regime reportedly demanded VOA to banish a list of critics from appearing on its programs and coverage.

We find it appropriate and timely to quote from a speech H.E. Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton, who happens to be one of the esteemed members of BBG, delivered last month at the African Union, Addis Ababa. Secretary Clinton rightly told African leaders: “The status quo is broken; the old ways of governing are no longer acceptable; it is time for leaders to lead with accountability, treat their people with dignity, respect their rights, and deliver economic opportunity. And if they will not, then it is time for them to go.”

As you very well know, it is impossible to hold leaders accountable and guarantee dignity and human rights without freedom of expression and free press. The struggle of the Ethiopian people to create a nation founded on freedom, democracy, dignity, rule of law, transparency and accountability has been severely hampered by the relentless efforts by the ruling TPLF/EPRDF in Ethiopia to silence every little voice of dissent and critical view. Only within the last five years, scores of newspapers have been closed down, many journalists have been jailed and nearly one hundred of them have been forced into exile. In addition, the regime blocks news websites and blogs and intensively jams international broadcasts.

The Ethiopian government is one of the most anti-free press regimes in the world lined up and in league with Burma, Cuba, Iran and others. This has been consistently reported by credible human rights organizations, the State Department annual human rights report and free press advocates such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters without Borders and International Press Institute.

Having said that, we would like to bring to your attention recent developments that have created a cloud of concern and anxiety among Americans of Ethiopian origin as well as the Ethiopian Diaspora. The Voice of America means a lot to the majority of Ethiopians who have depended on its balanced, objective and reliable reporting and programs.

It is to be remembered that three BBG Governors, Susan McCue, Dana Perino and Michael Meehan, along with four senior VOA staff members, travelled to Ethiopia, Southern Sudan and Nigeria between June 21 to 28. On 23rd June, Mr. David Arnold, a member of the delegation and former Horn of Africa chief, appeared on VOA Amharic and shared some important information to listeners. Mr. Arnold disclosed that the government of Ethiopia had demanded VOA to ban a long list of vocal critics.

In what appears to be a very unusual move, Mr. Arnold was suspended from his position, though has now been reinstated. According to reports, there was no factual error in his statement. However, the audio as well as text archive of the report has been removed from VOA's official website without any corrections, explanations or apologies. We would like an investigation into this matter and urge BBG to have the deleted files be resorted.

On 10th July 2011, a key public meeting, which was focused on the future of Ethiopia, was held at the Sheraton National Hotel, in Arlington, Virginia. The first of its kind, the meeting was jointly organized by Ginbot 7, the Oromo Liberation Front and Alliance for Liberty Equality and Justice in Ethiopia (ALEJE). We understand that VOA decided not to cover the event after it was scheduled to be aired on VOA Amharic service on Monday, July 11. It also emerged that VOA has decided to give less coverage for Diaspora and political issues. We called upon BBG not only to clarify VOA's stand in light of the missions of VOA.

It has also come to our attention that an audio archive file that contains critical view on current problems within VOA Horn of Africa section aired on July 18 in Amharic was also deleted. We would like to urge BBG to investigate the matter and explain why these kinds of damaging measures that can dent the confidence that millions of Ethiopians have on VOA.

It is to be remembered that VOA has been a target of the Meles regime. In the aftermath of the 2005 massacre, five journalists working for VOA Amharic service were charged with high treason, "genocide" and outrage against the constitution by the Meles regime. Though the charges were dropped, it clearly showed, once again, that the Meles regime is intolerant to the free flow of information.

The jamming efforts of all independent broadcasts including the VOA have intensified after Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told reporters in March 2010 the following:

"We have been convinced for many years that in many respects, the VOA Amharic Service has copied the worst practices of radio stations such as Radio Mille Collines of Rwanda in its wanton disregard of minimum ethics of journalism and engaging in destabilizing propaganda.

"We have to know before we make the decision to jam, whether we have the capacity to do it. But I assure you if they assure me at some future date that they have the capacity to jam it, I will give them the clear guideline to jam it."

With the support of the Chinese government, the regime has now built a capacity to jam shortwave radio and satellite TV signals. VOA is a victim of these repressive efforts.

We do not want VOA to be hijacked by the agenda of Ethiopia's repressive regime. Neither do we wish to see VOA lose its vitality and service as a truly independent alternative media to the people of Ethiopia.

It is with high regard for BBG and VOA in particular, we humbly request Your Excellencies to ensure and guarantee that VOA continues to give the vital service it has been providing to the silenced people of Ethiopia consistent with its mission, the First Amendment of the United States constitution and America's cherished values of freedom and democracy.

We look forward to hearing from you very soon.

With highest regards,

Tamagne Beyene, Artist and Human Rights Activist

**On behalf of Ethiopian American Civic, Human Rights, and Free Press Support Groups**