

- The Office of Government Communications this week issued a statement on allegations made in the US State Department's Report on Human Rights for 2008. The report was published on February 25, and this week's statement contains the results of a detailed investigation, carried out over the last couple of months, into the State Department's report prepared under the previous US administration. While underlining that Ethiopia did not want to enter into any polemical dispute with the new US administration, the statement noted that even the most cursory reading revealed that the report was largely based on fabricated allegations from unreliable sources. It was quite clear the authors of the report had made no serious effort to investigate the origins of the claims they portrayed, or indeed their reality.

Again and again the investigation uncovered examples of cases where the State Department's claims of a political dimension to arrests, beatings, disappearances and natural deaths were simply untrue. On every occasion when the State Department report claims someone was killed because of membership of an opposition political party, friends and relatives knew nothing of this supposed political activity. Welelaw Muche's father, brothers and neighbors all deny any political relevance in his death; Aschalew Taye's sister and his boss are clear he had no political interest of any kind; he died in a brawl; of ten people allegedly killed in Gue because

they supposedly belonged to opposition parties, one died of natural causes, seven others were entirely fictitious and unknown in the town even among the opposition parties active there, and in the case of two students who were killed, the local security head was arrested and given a fifteen year sentence in March last year for authorizing excessive use of force. Fellow inmates of Ayana Chere testify he was not beaten in jail; regional MP, Wegayehu Dejene, specifically denies he was beaten; MP Gutu Mulisa never filed a complaint with his local police that he had been beaten.

One could go on at length. Time and again, it is clear that the authors of the State Department report made absolutely no effort to check the information they were being given by opposition political organizations or other bodies. Again and again people who had allegedly been arrested denied they had been detained, or had been released long before. Cases of supposedly arbitrary arrest proved to have appeared in court, been sentenced or released long ago. Even where, as in the trial of Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie, members of the US embassy were present as observers throughout the trial, the report still managed to get it wrong over the charges on which they were convicted. In the case of Birtukan Mideksa, the report willfully misrepresents her case, downplaying the legal issues involved for what it alleged, without evidence, are political issues. The report even claims the 2008 elections was an example of denying the right

of citizens to elect a government of their choice. Given that these were local elections only this is a bizarre comment. It might be added they were peaceful, multi-party and democratic elections with no constraints on registration and all parties had a more than proportional media access. There certainly were significant differences in the numbers of nominated candidates for these local kebele and woreda elections, and the opposition parties put up far less candidates. But, whatever the State Department might think, the fairness of any election cannot be calculated on the basis of the success or failure of opposition parties alone, however annoyed those parties might be at their level of support. It might be noted that the EPRDF is not the first party to get virtually 100% in council elections. The opposition CUD did almost exactly that in the elections for the Addis Ababa city council in 2005. The State Department made no claim that this was a denial of citizen's rights on that occasion or that it represented an abuse of human rights.

The Government's statement noted that Ethiopia had normally ignored reports in the past from the State Department, Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International because of their propensity to repeat unverified and unverifiable, even invented, allegations, their refusal to attempt any verification, to investigate the political affiliation of their sources, or make any effort to consult with the Government over even the wildest claims.

However, since opposition sources have discovered just how easy it is to get away with invented claims and manage to get these published by human right organizations with little or no contact with the country concerned, these have proliferated. It has become routine to repeat such fabrications without further investigation. The reports often copy from each other as well as from their own earlier reports without bothering to update or incorporate Government responses where available. Last year, the Government felt it necessary to reply to the numerous fictitious claims of burning villages, assassinations and other alleged Government abuses in a report by Human Rights Watch on the Somali Regional State. It now believes it is time to respond to the more outrageous errors in the State Department's report for 2009.

It is not just direct factual mistakes, it is wild and implausible interpretations for which no evidence is offered. In the section on 'Unlawful killings and disappearances', extraordinarily, the State Department manages to suggest that Ethiopia should share the blame for the ONLF's attack on the Abole oil camp when 74 Chinese and Ethiopians were slaughtered in cold-blood, many asleep in their beds. The report even appears to try and cast doubt on recent terrorist incidents in Ethiopia, suggesting that no one had claimed responsibility, and by implication throwing doubt on them. At the same time the statement also noted that in

most cases perpetrators had been arrested, tried and convicted. In fact, there was no secret of the political allegiance of these terrorists, as members of the OLF or the ONLF, or of the support they obtained from Eritrea. It was all widely publicized in various court cases. The US State Department's report managed to avoid noticing any of the details.

The Government's statement makes very clear that Ethiopia believes human rights must not be politicized. The struggle to promote human rights must be based on truth and reality and on real values. Campaigns for particular political or economic interests, launched under cover of the umbrella of human rights, can only discredit the ideals. By now, the State Department should be very aware of the dangers of this, given the dubious sources of so many of the report's claims and allegations. It should be added that the Government of Ethiopia has made it clear it is very willing to co-operate with anyone who is prepared to offer a positive commitment to the promotion of human rights on the basis of real and accurate facts, and to all issues relating to democratic rights, without bias or prejudice.

The Government statement concludes by pointing out that of the many critical conclusions on which the Government's investigation focused, it wanted to make two major points. First that the State Department's report relied largely on unsubstantiated and, all too often, entirely baseless evidence. It made no effort to verify any information with the Government

or any other bodies or to use readily available information that might confirm incidents or not as the case might be. This occurred so often that it could only be deliberate. It could not be due to any lack of information or any failure of understanding.

Secondly, the State Department relied almost exclusively on opposition groups, individuals, and non-governmental organizations, domestic and international, with a substantial record of defamation and anti-government campaigning. The relationship between these organizations and the US Government is seriously unhealthy. A culture of dependence has been created, the organizations and groups being dependent upon the US for material needs. They have every incentive to exaggerate and provide politically motivated reports in return for financial gain, direct or indirect. The US government knows very well these organizations do not have the capacity to function independently, but it continues to ensure their survival in return for information irrespective of its accuracy or its intent. This is the methodology and approach on which the State Department's report is based. As the Government statement concludes: "It is on these grounds that the Government of Ethiopia must label this report as seriously flawed. It is wildly inaccurate, highly unreliable both in its facts and its interpretations, and careless in presentation. It should be used, if at all, with extreme caution."

It should be emphasized that this statement was issued by the Government in response to a report from the US State Department written under the previous administration. To put it into context, the intention is not to undermine the relationship between Ethiopia and the United States, or cause it damage in anyway. It is the result of a conviction that honest and frank dialogue is necessary to strengthen and deepen the ties between Ethiopia and the US and to avoid mutual suspicion and misunderstandings. Reports such as the one just put out by the State Department cannot contribute to good relations. It can be expected that the Government will in future respond regularly to reports of this kind, in a similar manner, objectively and fairly to address any mistakes they might contain. Any speculation to the contrary should be set aside.