

Horrifying Testimony of Torture in TPLF Prison: Ethiopia (Ethiopian Task Force of NY/NJ)

Note: Ethiopia is a current non-permanent member of UN Security Council and a member of UN human rights council

VOA Interview: Part-1 (23 March 2017) + Part-2 (25 March 2017):

Habtamu Ayalew: Former spokesman of Andenet Party (Ethiopia)



VOA Introducer, Alula Kebede: Today's guest for democracy in action program is Mr. Habtamu Ayalew, former spokesperson of the opposition, Andenet Party (unity party) in Ethiopia. Mr. Habtamu was subjected to two years of imprisonment, waiting for trial after being accused of terrorism by the regime. He says his health crisis is the result of the inhumane treatment, torture and extreme abuse he endured while in prison. Based on his discussions, not only do the harsh and cruel torture techniques on prisoners result in health crisis, but also the deaths of many prisoners. He explains how he and others have suffered in prison under the current TPLF regime.

Prior to broadcasting the program, Solomon Kifle (VOA program producer and interviewer) requests parents to exclude children from listening to this gruesome and extremely shocking torture story.

Ato Habtamu starts his interview by saying you know In Ethiopia under the current regime if you ask or advocate for democratic rights, freedom and equality, your fate is one of the following 1. You End up in prison 2. You get killed or 3. You end up as a refugee in another country

Once I was taken to the central prison (Maekelawi in Amharic) I was subjected to excessive torture that caused me physical and psychological trauma. Extreme physical and mental scars have been inflicted on me by the regime.

Question-1: Were there times when you were subjected to solitary confinement in a dark room

Answer: The central prison has eight sections, sections one to eight

Section seven and eight are by far the most atrocious. Section eight is built underground with no windows and natural light so it is complete darkness. It is also extremely cold in there. It has four cells; the cells can sometimes be filled with cold water to make you even colder. Furthermore, the cells are standing or sleeping cells so if you stand you have no room to stretch hands and legs and if you sleep on one side you have no room to change positions.

The second section is section seven where I spent most of the four months when I was at central prison. Here the cells are very small but they purposely stuff people over capacity forcing you to basically pile on one another. The cell is right between two toilet rooms called "tawla" and "Siberia" toilet rooms, both toilets have intolerable stench, and below the cells a built-in big water tank. Early on we were like thirteen to fifteen in one cell then after a while they took some people out and five of us remained.

Question-2: We hear the major problem in Ethiopian prisons being toilet deprivation. How many times a day, were you allowed to use toilet rooms within a day.

Answer: In my four months in Siberia, we could use toilets two times in twenty-four hours. One was very early in the morning at 6:00 AM then the next one was at 6:00 PM. Whether you are ready or not that is your only chance and you must train your body to urinate and excrete within assigned time. There were three toilets, and despite how many people are in the cell, you are given fixed time as a group. If you are ten you are given ten minutes which means each person has an average of say one minute to relieve himself. You have no chance to go to toilet for another twelve hours, between those hours you are back into an extremely cold and very dark cell, the only cloth you have is the one you came to prison with, you are not given any additional cloth.

As we are deprived of toilet use we were allowed a one-liter plastic bottle for emergency purposes. Using the bottle, we are always mindful not to fill it up, if that happens you are in big trouble and most of the time you must force yourself to hold it until your assigned toilet time and that is extremely painful. Because of that your bladder could be out of use very easily, so developing a bladder issue is very common. In addition to getting interrogated and being subjected to different torture techniques daily, I had to always use my plastic bottle very carefully to urinate and hold on to my urine. Thus, I have suffered excruciating pain and damage to my bladder.

The only other time you get out of the cell is when they take you out for interrogation. Even then you will be taken through a very dark tunnel. When you are interrogated, unless you tell them

what they want you to say they have several heinous and extremely harsh techniques to make you suffer.

Question-3: In your opinion, among all the horrible torture techniques used on you can you describe one to three that are the most extreme.

Answer: It is difficult for me or anyone else to understand the level of cruelty practiced in that place.

(a) Crucifixion Room: They have a room where they have a hanger to crucify you like Jesus Christ. Whenever one of us are taken for interrogation the first question posed to you when you come back to the cell is, were you crucified?

(b) Forearm Hanger: They also have a room with a setup where you are hanged by your forearms. Then a two-liter plastic bag filled with water will be tied to your testicles. I do know people who had to endure that kind of torture and have suffered complete testicular damage. Due to privacy reasons, I will not name those guys but I wouldn't mind discussing names and addresses of those people who suffered such inhumane treatment to those who are interested in collecting evidence.

(c) Swollen testicles: Another technique they use for interrogation is where the interrogator sits directly in front of you. Your legs are cuffed and your hands are cuffed behind then they tie strings on your testicles and pull the strings and due to the intolerable pain, you will be forced to lean towards the interrogator. At that time, they will hit you hard with a rubber/wood baton or copper rods and push you back. Then, they will ask you to admit you are collaborating with a group, will ask you confess to anything they want. Due to the above-mentioned torture techniques, some people end up with swollen testicles, then walking or sleeping, any movement including closing your legs becomes extreme painful, thus people scream all day and night.

(d) Making You Unconscious: There is a small and very cold instrument they put in the middle of your head they kind of slap you with it from the back at which point you completely lose consciousness. If you are lucky to wake up, you will not remember what is done to you or things you have said. You will have no recollection whatsoever and takes a long time to recover, there are some people who never had a chance to wake up.

(e) Forcing you to urinate on yourself: They also do finger or sharp pinching on your kidneys on the left and right side to make you urinate on yourself.

(f) Interrogators urinate and defecate on prisoners: When some people were put under control prior to coming to the central prison, their face is completely covered and they were taken to an unknown location. This happened to some of the guys, they were tied to a chair and left in a dark room and interrogators urinate and defecate on them from top. The place is filled with urine and feces and has unbearable stench. They put protective clothing including masks to protect themselves but they humiliate and mentally and physically torture you. Those guys were then asked to sign statements prepared by the interrogators after which they were brought to the central prison. Some who were forced to sign after being subjected to that cruel, inhuman and

horrifying experience include, Abebe Wergesa, Lenjisa Alemayehu and some people from Gonder area including Angaw Tegegne, Abaye Zewdu, and Engida Awayehu. There are also some air force members that I know who were subjected to that horrible treatment.

There are other horrible and despicable things done to me in that place that my Ethiopian background will not allow me to discuss in public. Those are taboo for anyone be it Christian or Muslim or any other religion who grew up in my culture.

In addition to all the other happenings I told you, I will give you one example of what people were going through. One among nine of us accused, was a guy named Bahiru Degu. Bahiru did bravely testify the situation we were in to the Judge. Here is some of what he said

(a) He told the Judge, the fact that some of us are being tortured and accused of being from Gonder area, we were told by the interrogators that they are from Tigray and they tell us in our face they have and will continue humiliating us because of where we are from. People from Gonder were told their belts and pants are taken by the regime (which means they have taken their manness). For people like me they question since when did we Gurages care and get involved in a struggle. In simple words, we are all being tortured not only as individuals but we are being tortured, humiliated and mistreated as representatives of an ethnic group.

Same thing was done to all of us in prison:

Basically, they want us to believe that all Tigrass hate us and they want to install that hatred in our minds and they are doing it with clear purpose. While there are a lot of other despicable things they say, I will not belittle myself by even repeating some of those things. While I do understand the difference between the ruling party they belong to and the people, the hatred they preach in the name of Tigrans is so difficult to understand and accept, and they clearly challenge your core believes.

He also told the Judge about other horrendous crimes perpetrated on him including

(b) One day he was being tortured so much, his body couldn't take it, and he couldn't hold on to his urine anymore which resulted in him urinating on the carpet. TPLF interrogators made him kneel and lick his urine.

(c) And the fact that they pulled his nails with a rench, and extracted his nails.

When we heard that cruelty from Bahiru in court we were all questioning what an era we are living in?

One thing all of us who went through the central prison experience agree upon is that the TPLF regime in Ethiopia has abused our body with batons beyond belief and used demoralizing and psychologically damaging humiliation techniques to hurt and damage our brains and crush our bones. The very sad thing to me is the fact that our forefathers have fought to keep the freedom of this country, the country that these criminals are leading now from foreign invaders, however while their grand children deserve to be treated as descendants of hero's we are being punished

by the current government as if we are criminals that don't belong to that land, and that is a very pathetic situation.

Question-4: How did you come to America?

Answer: When I was in the central prison I developed a lot of medical problems, mainly because of toilet deprivation. There was a point when I was deprived of even the two times a day privilege, after that when I sit in the bathroom I started to notice heavy bleeding. Then I developed swelling issues, and it became very difficult for me to move around. Because of all the torture I suffered, I had difficulty moving my legs. I couldn't stand properly, thus whenever I had to go to court I needed others to support me as it was impossible for me to walk or stand on my own.

I was then taken to Zewditu Hospital where I gave blood and urine samples for checkup. Three times my blood and urine test results could not be located, thus I couldn't get proper treatment. No one ever took responsibility for misplacing my results. I then told the judge about my grave health situation and the mysterious disappearance of my hospital tests. The judge gave me a final chance to submit samples. That time my results were found, the doctors who then reviewed my results understood I was in grave danger and recommended immediate hospitalization. However, prison officials denied me that right to be hospitalized, thus my health condition further deteriorated.

When I was released from prison I had a third-grade hemorrhoid, a lot of veins in my leg were damaged. I also had kidney stones on both sides plus a bladder stone. I did seek immediate medical treatment in Addis Ababa, doctors did try but they decided they cannot do anything for my hemorrhoid problem so they were only trying to alleviate my pain with painkillers. I was taking a very strong pain killer, much more than what is normally allowed (was taking 16 ampules injection when the maximum allowed was only 2 ampules). After going through that treatment over four months the doctors told me the hemorrhoid may be developing to cancer

People back home and some Ethiopians abroad were trying hard for me to get better treatment outside the country. However, the government repeatedly denied me permission to travel and the court case was still active. However, at some point they were convinced that I will not make it and they decided to end the court case. That is when I filed up my request for visa at the US embassy to come here for treatment.

At the same time, Ethiopians in the US were collecting money for me to cover my medical bills. The US embassy gave me a visa and my wife was also issued a visa as a care giver, as both parents are traveling my daughter was also qualified for a visa.

After we got the visa and ready to travel sitting with our suit cases at the airport I was harassed one more time. I was sitting with my wife and my daughter at the airport when security forces encircled us, then they took me to a private room with my bags. They took most of the documents I was carrying. They kept asking me, how I was able to get a visa. They seem to be upset and puzzled by the fact that I was able to get a visa, they kept posing the same question. I explained the fact that did everything through proper channels, and did not do anything illegal.

They wanted to show me they have the power to do anything they desire to me and my family, they wanted me to feel like I don't belong there, and they wanted me to believe Ethiopia is not my country anymore.

Question-5: For people who say well whatever happened, at the end of the day he did ask to go outside the country for treatment and they were nice enough to allow him go out for treatment, what would you say to those people?

Answer: Well remember the late Professor Asrat Weld eyes, who said TPLF has labeled the Amhara as its enemy so Amhara's should organize and fight for their rights. Because of what he said he was imprisoned and mistreated and abused by the same TPLF regime. However, when they felt like he will not make it they released him from prison and even gave him permissions to travel, unfortunately they were right and he did not make it. So, the only reason they allowed me to get out is because they thought I will not make it to tell my story.

Let me be clear, I am here now not because the regime wanted me to recover, I am only alive by the grace of God. God's plan for me was greater than their evil deeds.

In addition to listening to the cries of so many Ethiopians that love me, God was looking after my young daughter who suffered too much with me and never had a chance to have fun with her dad. So, I would like to thank all Ethiopians who prayed for me despite their religious affiliations. Most of all I would like to thank the God I always believe in and my savior Jesus Christ who is the son of God and beloved Merry. There is no reason for me to thank the regime.

Question-6: How is your health now?

Answer: As I said I was treated for a third-grade hemorrhoid. My surgery was successfully done at the colorectal center of George Town medical university. Based on what I was told I am the first case where they witnessed hemorrhoid developing this far and damaging so many veins. In that regard, I was a unique case for the medical community there. I am referred to another medical center for my legs and will be starting that treatment soon.

I would like to thank all members of the hospital staff and the Ethiopian community who helped me to recover

Question-7: So, after you get better do you have a plan to go back and rejoin the peaceful struggle

Answer: I do believe in the fact that I am born to help and struggle for Ethiopia and Ethiopians. However, my health conditions will determine how I could be of help. If I go home and end up in prison like Dr. Madera, that will not be helpful to the struggle and I prefer not to do that. From what I see the peaceful struggle in Ethiopia is in grave danger and we should look in to what we can do to change that. I will see how I can help my country as soon as I am back on my feet.

Ato Habtamu, I would like to thank you for sharing your story

Thank you

Interview Translated to English: by Ethiopian Task Force NY/NJ

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