



**INTERNATIONAL PEN
WRITERS IN PRISON COMMITTEE
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**Ethiopia
Wesenseged Gebrekidan
Journalist**

In Ethiopia, you don't even have to be the author of allegedly defamatory comments to find yourself in prison. Wesenseged Gebrekidan was arrested in November 2005 and convicted of "criminal defamation" a month later even though he was merely the editor of the issue of the newspaper that contained an apparently defamatory article.

Gebrekidan's eight-month sentence stemmed from an opinion piece that appeared in *Ethiop* in 2002 regarding former diplomat Habtemariam Seyoum. In the column Seyoum was censured for comments he had made in praise of the diplomatic strategy Ethiopia had adopted towards their neighbours Eritrea. Such criticism was deemed sufficiently compelling evidence to find the editor guilty under Ethiopia's catch-all defamation laws.

Of course, had this been the only charge against Gebrekidan, he would have been freed in July having served his sentence. However, he remains in prison in Addis Ababa because he has since been condemned to sixteen months' imprisonment after being found guilty of a further charge of "criminal defamation". The sentence, handed down in April 2006, stemmed from a 2002 *Ethiop* article in which the editor of *Abyotawi Democracy*, a publication owned by the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), was deemed to have been defamed.

Gebrekidan's troubles do not end there. Unlike in many other countries where defamation laws are limited to individuals, in Ethiopia, the presidency, government departments and state institutions can all be defamed. As a result, Gebrekidan faces no fewer than five further "criminal defamation" charges for articles criticising the Ministry of Justice and the Ethiopian armed forces.

Gebrekidan, who by the time of his imprisonment had moved from the editorship of *Ethiop* to that of the weekly *Addis Zena*, also faces a charge of "treason" for allegedly inciting genocide. This is in connection with the reporting of the November 2005 clashes between security forces and demonstrators protesting against supposed irregularities in the parliamentary elections earlier in the year. The spurious grounds for the charge of

“genocide” include “allegations of causing fear and harm to an ethnic group, and harming members of the Tigrayan-led ruling party by excluding them from social events and funerals”. The trial opened on 23 February 2006.

The publisher of *Addis Zena*, Fasil Yenealem – who is also in prison facing a charge of “treason” – stated earlier this year: “We’re not against this government. It is through this government that we began to write. But when the government sees people starting to demand more democracy, freedom of expression, and development, they think it’s the fault of the press.”

Appeal address

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Please also send a copy of your letter to the Ethiopian representative in your country.

Writing (Opinion piece without byline in *Addis Zena* – cited as one of the reasons why Gebrekidan is facing a charge of “treason”)

Addis Zena, Sept. 19, 2005: “The people of Ethiopia have clearly been robbed of their voices. A party or a government that conspired to rob the voice of its own people should never be given legitimacy. Even if it wants to stay in power, the people would only chant ‘Thief! Thief!’ and would not let it happen. And because the electoral board has been the main organizer and accomplice of such robbery, it should be denounced and should lose its credibility...”

“Opposition parties must provide wise leadership in recovering the voice of the people from the party that has stolen it in order to stay in power.”

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