

Ethiopian journo honoured with Top PEN Prize

PEN American Center yesterday, 12 April 2012, named Eskinder Nega, journalist and dissident blogger in Ethiopia, as the recipient of its 2012 PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award.



Eskinder Nega Source:
www.pen.org

Nega, an advocate for press freedom and freedom of expression in Ethiopia, was arrested on 14 September 2011, and is currently being tried under the country's sweeping anti-terror legislation, which criminalizes any reporting deemed to "encourage" or "provide moral support" to groups and causes which the government considers to be "terrorist." He could face the death penalty if convicted.

The award, which honors international writers who have been persecuted or imprisoned for exercising or defending the right to freedom of expression, will be presented at PEN's Annual Gala on 1 May 2012, at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

The story of Eskinder Nega

"The Ethiopian writer Eskinder Nega is that bravest and most admirable of writers, one who picked up his pen to write things that he knew would surely put him at grave risk," said Peter Godwin, president of PEN American Center.

"Yet he did so nonetheless. And indeed he fell victim to exactly the measures he was highlighting, Ethiopia's draconian 'anti terrorism' laws that criminalize critical commentary. This is at least the seventh time that the government of Meles Zenawi has detained Eskinder Nega in an effort to muzzle him. Yet Nega has continued his spirited pursuit of freedom of expression. Such humbling courage makes Nega a hugely deserving recipient of the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award." says Godwin.

Nega had been publishing articles critical of the government since 1993, he then opened his first newspaper, *Ethiopia*,

which was soon shut down by authorities. He was the general manager of Serkalem Publishing House, which published the newspapers *Asqual*, *Satenaw*, and *Menelik*, all of which are now banned in Ethiopia.

He has also been a columnist for the monthly magazine *Change* and for the US-based news forum EthioMedia, which are also banned. He has been detained at least seven times under prime minister Meles Zenawi, including in 2005, when he and his journalist wife Serkalem Fasil were imprisoned for 17 months on treason charges for their critical reporting on the government's violent crackdown of protests following disputed elections, and briefly in February 2011 for "attempts to incite Egyptian and Tunisian-like protests in Ethiopia" after he published articles on the Arab Spring.

Their newspapers have been shut down and Nega has been denied a license to practice journalism since 2005, yet he has continued to publish columns critical of the government's human rights record and calling for an end to political repression and corruption.

Nega questions the government

Nega was again arrested on September 14, 2011, following a column he published questioning the government's claim that a number of journalists it had detained were suspected terrorists, and for criticizing the arrest of well-known Ethiopian actor and government critic Debebe Eshetu on terror charges.

Shortly after his arrest, Nega was charged with affiliation with the banned political party Ginbot 7, which the Ethiopian government considers a terrorist organisation. On November 10, Nega was charged and further accused of plotting with and receiving weapons and explosives from neighboring Eritrea to carry out terrorist attacks in Ethiopia. State television portrayed Nega and other political prisoners as "spies for foreign forces." He is currently being held in Maekelawi Prison in Addis Ababa, where detainees are reportedly often ill-treated and tortured.

International organisations show concern

PEN, Human Rights Watch, the Committee to Protect Journalists along with other international organisations have long been concerned about Ethiopia's use of anti-terrorism legislation to justify the jailing of journalists and members of the political opposition. Nega's trial on charges under the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, which covers the "planning preparation, conspiracy, incitement, and attempt" of terrorist acts, illustrates this trend.

During his trial, which opened on 6 March 2012, the prosecution presented evidence that consisted of nearly inaudible recordings of telephone conversations and other comments and a video of a town hall meeting in which Nega discusses the differences between Arab countries and Ethiopia. Nega took the stand on 28 March and denied all charges against him, saying he has never conspired to overthrow the government through violence and admitting only to reporting on the Arab Spring and speculating on whether a similar movement could take place in Ethiopia.

Serkalem Fasil, who was the recipient of the 2007 Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation, maintained that her husband is "a journalist, not a member of a political party."

Nega praised for his courage

In announcing the award in New York, Freedom to Write program director, Larry Siems praised Eskinder Nega's "courageous use of the written word to advocate on behalf of his fellow journalists and citizens."

"Nega's critiques of the Zenawi government go back two decades, and in recent years he has written fearlessly about the need for peaceful democratic transition and about the fate of other journalists unjustly silenced under the pretense of fighting terrorism," Siems said. "Now as he faces the same fate, in no small part because he spoke out on their behalf, he continues to press for freedom of expression from behind bars. He is truly an extraordinary individual and we are proud to be able to award him this honor."

Writer, historian and PEN member, Barbara Goldsmith underwrites the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award. This is the 26th year the award has honored an international literary figure who has been persecuted or imprisoned for exercising or defending the right to freedom of expression. Candidates are nominated by PEN International and any of its 145 constituent PEN centers around the world, and screened by PEN American Center and an Advisory Board comprising experts in the field.

PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award

The Advisory Board for the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award includes Carroll Bogert, deputy executive director for External Relations at Human Rights Watch; Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation; Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, international vice president of PEN International and PEN American Center Trustee; Aryeh Neier, former president of the Open Society Foundation; and Joel Simon, executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists.

The Freedom to Write Award is an extension of PEN's year-round advocacy on behalf of the more than 900 writers and journalists who are currently threatened or in prison. 46 women and men have received the award since 1987; 33 of the 37 honorees who were in prison at the time they were honored were subsequently released.

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