

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 24, 2014

Ambassador Girma Birru  
3506 International Drive, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20008

Dear Ambassador Girma:

We write to express our concern over the recent arrest of several bloggers and journalists affiliated with the Zone 9 blog. A public prosecutor has accused the detainees – independent journalists Asmamaw Hailegeorgis, Tesfalem Waldyes, and Edom Kassaye, and bloggers Abel Wabella, Atnaf Berhane, Mahlet Fantahun, Natnail Feleke, Zelalem Kibret, and Befekadu Hailu – of working with foreign human rights organizations and using social media to create instability in the country. And only after 80 days of detention have they now been charged with terrorism, despite the lack of presentation of any credible evidence of such. Instead, their arrest appears to be an effort to narrow the already small space for free media expression in Ethiopia.

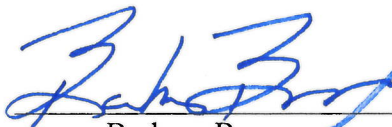
Several respected human rights organizations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists and Freedom Now, have raised concerns about the Zone 9 detainees. We note that US Secretary of State John Kerry also raised their detention with Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and Foreign Minister Tedros Adhanom during a visit to Ethiopia in May. Given such widespread concern and the fact that these nine journalists and bloggers are nearing three months in jail, almost all of which have been without charge, we urge their timely release.

The strong and long-standing cooperation between our nations remains critically important. Yet, we remain concerned about the state of press and political liberties in Ethiopia. As such, we urge you to uphold these basic freedoms – rights that are enshrined in both the US and Ethiopian constitutions and are hallmarks of democratic societies – including for the Zone 9 detainees. We look forward to a continued dialogue on this and the full range of our shared bilateral and global interests.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



Barbara Boxer  
United States Senator



Robert Menendez  
United States Senator