



Congressman Donald Payne

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For Immediate Release
July 18, 2007

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Payne Bill on Ethiopian Democracy Moves Forward

Washington, DC – The US House of Representative’s Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health today approved HR 2003, the Ethiopian Democracy and Accountability Act which was introduced by Congressman Donald M. Payne, Chairman of the subcommittee, on April 23, 2007. The bill encourages human rights reform in Ethiopia.

“I was dismayed to learn of the hundreds of people killed and the thousands arrested as they attempted to exercise their right to protest the outcome of the May 2005 elections in Ethiopia,” Payne remarked during the hearing. “No one has been held liable for those crimes and political prisoners have been languishing in jail for two years. If the government was serious about democracy, rule of law and accountability, it would hold accountable the security forces responsible for killing citizens and it would free the political prisoners who are only guilty of running for office and winning.”

Approved by a voice vote, the Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health endorsed the legislation which stipulates that the Ethiopian government foster accountability and support democracy or risk losing security assistance. In particular, it requires the withholding of assistance until the President of the United States can certify to Congress that political prisoners are freed, those responsible for the violence related to the 2005 protests are held accountable, freedom of speech and information are respected, and Ethiopian human rights groups are allowed to operate without being harassed. It also authorizes \$20 million to support democracy, human rights and economic development in Ethiopia.

On June 16, 2007, the Ethiopian courts sentenced 35 of the jailed political leaders to life in prison for inciting violence and attempting to overthrow the government. The defendants were also denied the future right to vote and to hold public office. Since that time, there have been reports that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi requested that the Pardon Board review the sentences and either recommend amnesty or pardon. “I hope the prisoners are granted full amnesty which includes the restoration of the right to hold public office and vote,” Payne stated.

After the subcommittee met, Payne stated, “I am glad that we are one step closer to the passage of this important bill. With the US government using its influence, we could make major strides toward rectifying the unfortunate events of 2005.”

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