

Golden Pen of Freedom 2014 Presentation

Speech by Erik Bjerager, President, World Editors Forum

Opening Ceremony, 66<sup>th</sup> World Newspaper Congress and 21<sup>th</sup> World Editors Forum

Torino, Italy, 9th June 2014

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am sure you will agree with me when I say that the work of journalists and editors can carry with it a heavy burden. With all the passion and dedication, as professionals committed to serving the interests of justice, freedom and the respect of human beings, they are in the front line when such principles come under attack.

Our 2014 Golden Pen of Freedom laureate knows only too well how a lifetime dedicated to justice and freedom can be erased at the whim of those intent on disguising their own failures.

Ethiopian publisher and journalist Eskinder Nega (**ESS-KIN-DA NAE-GA**), a celebrated intellectual and relentless fighter

for freedom of expression, has become an emblem of Ethiopia's recent struggle for democracy. No stranger to prison, he is also an unforgettable warning to every working Ethiopian journalist and editor that the quest to create a just, free society comes with a heavy price.

Over the past decade, Eskinder's commitment to human rights has landed him in jail on at least seven different occasions. He is currently being held in the Kaliti (KAL-IT-EE) prison outside of the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. Convicted as a "terrorist", he is serving an 18-year sentence.

What is his crime? It is to have challenged the very same laws used to imprison him, and to have questioned whether the Arab Spring protests that swept the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 could one day be repeated in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian government has tried to present Eskinder as a rabble-rouser bent on fomenting violent revolution. However, accounts from other journalists, backed by court documents and the hundreds of articles he has written, portray a tenacious writer who has called only for peaceful change and reconciliation during his twenty-year professional career.

During the 2005 general elections, a glimmer of hope emerged for democracy in Ethiopia. For the first time, voters were presented with a meaningful choice at the polls, suggesting that

the country's political system might evolve into a true multi-party democracy.

But instead, the ruling party clamped down and claimed victory. Violent clashes broke out. In reaction, the government suppressed all independent voices and closed down thirteen independent newspapers.

Eskinder's three newspapers were among them.

Eskinder and his wife, Serkalem Fasil (SER-KAL-EM FASS-IL) – who is also a renowned journalist and newspaper publisher - were both charged with treason. The pair spent seventeen months in jail, during which time Serkalem (SER-KAL-EM) gave birth to their son.

For Eskinder, leaving Ethiopia was never an option. He and his family could have returned to the United States where he spent part of his childhood and college years. His wife and son are there now, applying for asylum. Even as his colleagues fled the systematic jailing and constant harassment of the country's independent press, Eskinder stayed behind to continue writing and publishing. In his own words, "There was simply too much to be done."

At the onset of the Arab uprisings at the beginning of 2011, police intensified their warnings to Eskinder. He was threatened with more time in jail and even death. Eskinder stood by his

writing and speculated that what was being seen in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere could well occur in Ethiopia if the regime refused to reform. If protests did come to Ethiopia, he urged the security forces not to open fire on unarmed demonstrators as they had done after the disputed 2005 elections.

In August 2011, Eskinder wrote: “Ethiopia must and should avoid violence. If Ethiopia shuns violence so will most of Sub-Saharan Africa. And only then will the advent of the African Spring be even better news than that of the Arab Spring.”

Five days before his arrest, Eskinder published a column calling for the government to stop the imprisonment of dissenters. He highlighted the brutal conditions they faced in prison after the ruling party cited a vague terrorist plot as justification for imprisoning a group of academics, writers and intellectuals.

In his column, Eskinder spoke out in their defence. He said none of them fitted the profile of a “terrorist.” But his words encountered the very same laws that put his colleagues behind bars, and he was returned to the dusty cells of Kaliti (KAL-IT-EE) prison on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2011.

Nine months after his arrest, Eskinder was convicted under the country's vague Anti-Terrorism law, which has been used to imprison journalists and publishers in the past years.

Specifically, the government accused Eskinder of colluding with an outlawed opposition party in an attempt to overthrow the regime - charges he has rejected on numerous occasions.

The co-founder of the opposition party - a former elected mayor of Addis Ababa - is even on record as saying Eskinder was not, and has never been, linked to the party.

To no avail. Eskinder is still in prison and if he serves a full sentence, he will be due for release in 2030.

Ethiopia continues to resort to anti-terrorism legislation to silence opposition and shackle the press. Alarmingly, beyond Ethiopia, countless states around the world are misusing anti-terrorism legislation to muzzle journalists, bloggers and freedom of expression advocates. Research suggests that over half of the more than 200 journalists in jail last year were being held on “anti-state” charges.

Let me be clear: Journalism is not terrorism.

Politicians should not abuse the notion of national security to protect the government, powerful interests or particular ideologies, or to prevent the exposure of wrongdoing or incompetence.

Furthermore, it is highly irresponsible for any government to associate the profession of journalism with acts of terror.

Speaking of Eskinder, his wife Serkalem (SER-KAL-EM) said in a New York Times interview last year: “To create the country that we want, someone has to sacrifice.”

We should all be deeply uncomfortable that anyone should be called upon to make such a sacrifice.

I draw to a close with the words of our laureate himself. From one of his letters sent from prison last year, Eskinder wrote:

“Why should the rest of the world care? The Roman poet Horace said it best: ‘*mutate nomine de te fabula narratur* - change only the name and this story is also about you.’

Whenever justice suffers, our common humanity suffers too.”

We would have loved to welcome Eskinder to Torino today to accept his award in person. Despite repeated efforts, our calls for his release have been met with silence by the Ethiopian authorities. Regardless, we shall persevere until the day Eskinder is free to take his place amongst us.

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, at the request of Eskinder’s family, I would now like to call on Swedish journalist Martin Schibbye. Martin spent fourteen months in the same jail as Eskinder on similar terrorism-related charges and knows our laureate’s story all too well. Martin, we would be

honoured if you would come forward to accept the 2014  
Golden Pen of Freedom on behalf of Eskinder Nega.