



HRSP NEWSLETTER

U.S. Department of Justice, Criminal Division, Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section

June 2019

Red Terror Human Rights Abuser Sentenced for Naturalized Fraud

On May 23, Mergia Negussie Habteyes (Negussie), a naturalized U.S. citizen residing in Alexandria, Virginia, was sentenced by Senior U.S. District Judge T.S. Ellis, III to 37 months in prison for having fraudulently obtained United States citizenship.

According to court documents, Negussie, 58, participated in the persecution of detainees at a makeshift prison from 1977 to 1978 during the “Red Terror,” a campaign of brutal violence when Ethiopia’s ruling military council, the Derg, and its affiliates arrested, extra-judicially imprisoned, interrogated, and tortured tens of thousands of members, perceived members, and supporters of political opposition groups. Negussie, while serving at the Higher 3 prison in Addis Ababa, tortured detainees on account of their political opinion by beating them with belts, rods, and other objects, causing in many instances permanent scarring and injury. During the beatings, Negussie questioned the detainees about their affiliation with the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and opposition activities of the EPRP, which was the Derg’s primary political opponent at the time. At sentencing, witnesses testified that Negussie played a leadership role at the prison, ordering and encouraging beatings of prisoners and selecting which detainees would be executed.

Negussie came to the United States in 1999 after telling a series of lies to United States immigration officials in the course of obtaining authorization to enter the United States as a refugee. He ultimately became a naturalized United States citizen in 2008. During his sworn naturalization interview, he falsely stated that he had never persecuted persons because of their political opinion, and failed to disclose that he had committed a crime or offense for which he was not arrested. Additionally, Negussie falsely stated that he had never given false or misleading information to any United States government official while applying for any immigration benefit and that he had never lied to United States immigration officials to gain entry or admission into the United States.

Negussie’s materially false representations in sworn statements to U.S. immigration officials resulted in his procurement of naturalization contrary to law. In addition to sentencing Negussie to a period of incarceration, Negussie’s U.S. citizenship was also revoked.

“Negussie-Habteyes believed he could conceal his past participation in the brutal persecution of political dissidents in order to enjoy the benefits of U.S. citizenship and escape accountability in Ethiopia,” said Assistant Attorney General Brian A. Benczkowski. “This case demonstrates the Justice Department’s continued commitment to ensuring that the United States does not become a safe haven for human rights violators.”

“Negussie hid his past atrocities as a human rights abuser and lied his way into the United States,” said G. Zachary Terwilliger, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia. “United States citizenship and the protections and privileges that accompany it is not intended for those who persecute their fellow man. My thanks to the prosecutors and law enforcement agents and officers for their outstanding work on this case.”

The case was investigated by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Washington, D.C. with the support of the Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Center (HRVWCC). Established in 2009, the HRVWCC furthers the government’s efforts to identify, locate, and prosecute human rights abusers in the United States, including those who are known or suspected to have participated in persecution, war crimes, genocide, torture, extrajudicial killings, female genital mutilation, or the use or recruitment of child soldiers. The HRVWCC leverages the expertise of a select group of agents, lawyers,

intelligence and research specialists, historians, and analysts who direct the government's broader enforcement efforts against these offenders. The HRVWCC comprises ICE HSI's Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Unit, ICE's Human Rights Law Section, the FBI's International Human Rights Unit, and the Justice Department's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP).

Brian A. Benczkowski, Assistant Attorney General of the Justice Department's Criminal Division, G. Zachary Terwilliger, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, and Patrick J. Lechleitner, Special Agent in Charge of ICE HSI Washington, D.C., made the announcement after sentencing from Senior U.S. District Judge T.S. Ellis, III. HRSP Trial Attorney Jamie B. Perry and Assistant U.S. Attorney Alexander E. Blanchard prosecuted the case with assistance from HRSP Historian Dr. Christopher Hayden, HRSP paralegal specialist Claire Garvin, and EDVA paralegal specialist Angela Lawrence.

Members of the public who have information about former human rights violators in the United States are urged to contact U.S. law enforcement through the Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section toll-free at 1-800-813-5863, or through the HSI tip line at 1-866-DHS-2-ICE or its online tip form at www.ice.gov/exec/forms/hsi-tips/tips.asp.

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