



HRSP NEWSLETTER

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

June 2021

Naturalized U.S. Citizen from Ethiopia Arrested on Charge of Fraudulently Obtaining Citizenship Including Failure to Disclose Participation in Persecution During the Ethiopian Red Terror

A Georgia man was arrested on June 17, 2021, on criminal charges related to allegations that he lied to obtain U.S. citizenship. According to the indictment, which was unsealed following the arrest, Mezemr Abebe Belayneh, 65, of Snellville, served as a civilian interrogator at a makeshift prison in Dilla, Ethiopia, during a period in the late 1970s known as the Red Terror. At the prison, Abebe ordered and participated in the severe physical abuse and interrogation of prisoners held on the basis of their political beliefs. The indictment alleges that Abebe unlawfully procured U.S. citizenship, to which he was not entitled, by concealing his involvement in the Red Terror when he falsely claimed that he had not persecuted anyone because of their political opinions and had never committed a crime for which he had not been arrested.

“Human rights violators have no home in the United States,” said Acting Assistant Attorney General Nicholas L. McQuaid of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. “No matter how much time has passed, the Department of Justice will find and prosecute individuals who committed atrocities in their home countries and covered them up to gain entry to the United States.”

“The laws of the United States are designed to provide refuge for the victims of human rights violation and to exclude those who commit them,” said Acting U.S. Attorney Kurt R. Erskine for the Northern District of Georgia. “The defendant’s alleged lies through his immigration and naturalization process subverted this system. We commend our law enforcement partners at the Department of Homeland Security and the dedicated team at the Department of Justice who work tirelessly to assure that individuals such as the defendant do not have a safe haven in our communities.”

“Abebe’s lies and horrible past deeds have thankfully come back to haunt him,” said Special Agent in Charge Katrina W. Berger, who oversees Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) operations in Georgia and Alabama. “Now he will be held accountable. Thanks to some great work from the agents and officers involved in this case as well as our law enforcement partners, justice will be served.”

Abebe is charged with two counts of unlawful procurement of naturalization. The maximum sentence for each count is 10 years in prison. If convicted, a federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors. A conviction would also result in automatic revocation of Abebe’s U.S. citizenship.

Homeland Security Investigations’ Atlanta Field Office is investigating the case, and coordination was provided by 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, and the use or recruitment of child soldiers.

Trial Attorneys Jamie Perry and Patrick Jasperse of the Criminal Division's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP) and Assistant U.S. Attorney Jessica Morris of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia are prosecuting the case, with assistance from HRSP Senior Historian Dr. Christopher Hayden.

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 HSI tip line at [1-866-DHS-2-ICE](tel:1-866-DHS-2-ICE) (1-866-347-2423) or its online tip form at www.ice.gov/tips.

An indictment is merely an allegation and all defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

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