

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

Statement of U.S. Representative Ed Royce
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade
"Joining Up EU and US Policy Towards Eritrea and the Horn for the Promotion of
Democracy and Human Rights"
Europe External Policy Advisors
Brussels
November 9, 2009

Thank you for the opportunity to share a few thoughts on Eritrea and democracy and human rights in the Horn. My observations are based upon my watching the Horn as a Foreign Affairs Committee member, serving for eight years as chairman of its Africa Subcommittee. I wish I was attending the EEPA conference, as you represent great collective intelligence on these troubling issues.

My first year in Congress was 1993, the year of Eritrean independence. In the early years, as you know, hopes were high. Sadly, there are few countries that have so quickly and dramatically turned from hope to despair.

At the beginning, Eritrea captured Washington. It put itself forth as proud and independent, shunning foreign aid, which wasn't true. It was myth-making time, with Eritrea being championed as a model. The height of this delusion was Isaias Afewerki's inclusion, along with Meles Zenawi, as "New African Leaders," embraced by the Clinton Administration. Needless to say, this personal embrace hugely disserved democracy.

During the late 1990s, I gained personal insight into the actual state of democracy and human rights in Eritrea. I tried to assist Esther Yohannes, an Eritrean in America whose husband and young children were locked-away by the Eritrean government for Mr. Yohannes' political dissent. Esther was lured to Eritrea and imprisoned too. Those actions, and its growing belligerence, shattered Eritrea's democratic facade for me.

Then there was the commonly described "senseless" war with Ethiopia. I often heard, "How could these countries sacrifice so many for such a small piece of land?" That missed the point. By that time, Eritrea's government had no regard for its citizens' lives, if it ever did.

The war did, however, solidify the garrison state. You may disagree that this was the government's motive, but the democratic and human rights trajectory since has been sharply downward. Today the regime sacrifices its people to famine for the sake of its control. Ethiopia, meanwhile, has many democracy and human rights shortcomings.

In June, I offered an amendment in the House of Representatives to designate Eritrea as a "state sponsor of terrorism." U.N. report after U.N. report cites Eritrea as providing arms and military training to the al-Qaeda-linked *al-Shabaab*. This includes shoulder-fired missiles, a direct threat to the national security of the U.S., and others.

As I said in debate, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa has stated that, "we have clear evidence that Eritrea is supporting...extremist[s]" and that "the Government of Eritrea continues to supply weapons and munitions to extremists and terrorist elements." This isn't new; the Bush Administration took a similar view of Eritrea's destructive role in Somalia.

My amendment was defeated, on a party-line vote. Opponents felt that frankness jeopardized diplomacy. I don't believe that denying the truth helps. Somalia, as you know, is a growing terrorist concern for the U.S., Britain and others. Counter-terrorism will remain a top priority for Congress. I hope the Obama Administration moves ahead with this terrorist designation. Eritrea's trade benefits under our African trade program have been revoked.

The Horn is plagued by problems. Advancing democracy and human rights is very difficult. Progress will be modest, at best. But rule by diktat has brought the region very low.

I believe, as you do, that empowering the people of the region through democracy and human rights is essential to progress on peace, stability and development. That many brave Eritrean and Ethiopian democracy advocates, including some of you, are being forcefully repressed is discouraging --but it is also a sign of hope that these governments are coming under democratic pressure from within. I look forward to hearing about your thoughts on these struggles. I wish the conference well.