

Nairobi, December 19 (Infosplusgabon) - Ethiopian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release journalist Dawit Kebede and stop harassing members of the press, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said yesterday.

On November 30, federal police arrested Dawit, managing editor of the online news outlet Awramba Times, while he was dining with friends at a restaurant in Addis Ababa, the capital, according to Dawit's U.S-based brother Bisrat Bahta and the journalist's wife Tigest, both of whom spoke to CPJ via messaging app. On December 1, police officers searched Dawit's home, confiscating magazines, recording devices, books, cellphones, and CDs, they said.

He is being detained at the Addis Ababa Police Commission, also known as Sostegna, Tigest said. Police allege that Dawit disseminated false information, tarnished the image of the government in his work, and committed a variety of other offenses, but have not formally charged him with a crime, according to media reports and a person familiar with his case who spoke to CPJ on the condition of anonymity, citing safety concerns.

“Authorities should release Dawit Kebede unconditionally, as well as all other journalists in detention in connection to their work, and end an emerging pattern of legal harassment of the

press,” said CPJ’s sub-Saharan Africa representative, Muthoki Mumo. “Ethiopian journalists should feel free to publish critical reports and commentary, and this cannot happen in an environment where police can arrest and hold them for weeks without charge, blatantly weaponizing the judicial system to intimidate the media.”

On December 2, Dawit appeared at the Federal First Instance Arada Branch Court, where police accused him of disseminating inaccurate information, inciting violence, and attempting to violate the constitution, according to reports by the state-affiliated Fana Broadcasting Corporation and the privately owned Addis Standard news website. The court granted police the ability to hold him for 13 days pending investigation, according to those reports.

On December 15, at the same court, police further accused Dawit of sending information that allegedly tarnished the image of the federal government to Tigray TV and Dimtsi Woyane, broadcasters affiliated with the Tigray Peoples’ Liberation Front, a group in conflict with the federal government, according to the person familiar with the case, who was in court at the time, and a report by the online broadcaster EthioTube.

Police also accused Dawit of creating a negative perception of the government through interviews with leaders of the Tigray Peoples’ Liberation Front; disseminating false information and inciting violence through his Twitter page; and sharing false information on the Awramba Times YouTube page, according to the person who spoke to CPJ. The court granted police 10 additional days to hold Dawit in custody, according to that person.

Dawit said he is only being detained for doing his job as a journalist, according to the EthioTube report and the person who spoke to CPJ.

In November, Awramba Times published news content on YouTube and Facebook, including commentary on the conflict between the Ethiopian federal government and forces in Tigray state, according to CPJ's review of those pages. Awramba Times has about 41,000 followers on Facebook, and its YouTube videos regularly receive tens of thousands of views.

On November 28, Awramba Times republished a March 2020 interview with Debretsion Gebremichael, the leader of the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front. In that video, Debretsion spoke critically of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his party.

Ethiopian journalist Dawit Kebede. (Photo: CPJ/Rodney Lamkey Jr.)

On Twitter, where he has about 18,000 followers, Dawit's latest posts included allegations that the Ethiopian government was ethnically profiling people of Tigrayan identity; allegations that security personnel were barring refugees from fleeing Tigray to Sudan; and a suggestion that Abiy had mischaracterized the demographics of refugees fleeing from Tigray to Sudan.

The office of the federal attorney general did not respond to CPJ's emails requesting comment

on Dawit's case.

In early December, Federal Police Spokesperson Jeylan Abdi said he did not know about Dawit's case and referred CPJ to the prime minister's office for comment. When CPJ called and messaged Jeylan again today the call did not go through and he did not respond to the messages.

CPJ emailed the prime minister's office for comment on Dawit's case but did not receive any response.

In 2010, Dawit received CPJ's International Press Freedom Award for his work amid government obstruction and repression.

Dawit is one of seven Ethiopian journalists who were imprisoned as at December 1, 2020, according to CPJ's most recent prison census. Two of those journalists, Medihane Ekubamichael of the Addis Standard and Udii Musaa who previously worked with the Oromia Media Network, have since been freed on bail, according to news reports and one of Udii's lawyers, Abduljebar Hussein, who spoke to CPJ via messaging app.

CPJ has also documented several incidents this year in which Ethiopian authorities have detained journalists, sometimes for months, without formally charging them and in defiance of court orders.

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