



HRSP NEWSLETTER

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

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Ethiopian Human Rights Abuser Pleads Guilty To Fraudulently Obtaining U.S. Citizenship, Admitted Series Of Lies In Naturalization Process, Including Failure To Disclose Participation In Persecution During The Red Terror Period In Ethiopia

A naturalized U.S. citizen residing in Alexandria, Virginia, pleaded guilty on February 22, 2019 to a felony charge of having fraudulently obtained U.S. citizenship.

Mergia Negussie Habteyes, 58, pleaded guilty to one count of unlawfully procuring naturalization contrary to law before U.S. District Judge T. S. Ellis III of the Eastern District of Virginia. A sentencing hearing before Judge Ellis is scheduled for May 17, 2019. Negussie was charged in an indictment returned by a federal grand jury in the Eastern District of Virginia on August 14, 2018.

By his own admission, Negussie participated in the persecution of detainees in Ethiopia roughly from 1977 to 1978 during the “Red Terror,” a campaign of brutal violence during which Ethiopia’s ruling military council, the Derg, and its affiliates arrested, extra-judicially detained, interrogated and tortured tens of thousands of members, perceived members and supporters of political opposition groups. Negussie injured and abused detainees on account of their political opinion by beating them with weapons including belts, rods, and other objects, causing in many instances permanent scarring and injury. During these beatings, Negussie questioned the detainees about their affiliation with the Derg’s primary political opponent, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and its activities.

Negussie came to the United States in 1999 after telling a series of lies to U.S. immigration officials in the course of obtaining authorization to enter the United States as a refugee. He repeated those lies at the naturalization stage and ultimately became a U.S. citizen in 2008.

At his plea hearing, Negussie specifically admitted that, during his sworn naturalization interview, he falsely stated that he had never persecuted persons because of their political opinion, and he failed to disclose that he had committed a crime or offense for which he was not arrested. Additionally, Negussie admitted that he falsely stated that he had never given false or misleading information to any U.S. government official while applying for any immigration benefit and that he had never lied to U.S. 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.

“Individuals who participate in the kind of brutal human rights violations perpetrated by this defendant should not be able to find safe haven in the United States by misrepresenting themselves and their past,” said Assistant Attorney General Brian A. Benczkowski of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. “The Justice Department and its partners will continue to pursue those, like Negussie, who seek to subvert the U.S. immigration and naturalization system this way.”

“Negussie sought to outrun his past by employing deception to fraudulently obtain U.S. citizenship,” said U.S. Attorney G. Zachary Terwilliger of the Eastern District of Virginia. “We remain committed to investigating and prosecuting criminal immigration cases, including those involving human rights violators.”

Conviction will result in automatic revocation of Negussie's U.S. citizenship.

The case was jointly prosecuted by Trial Attorney Jamie Perry of the Criminal Division's HRSP and Assistant U.S. Attorney Alexander Blanchard of EDVA with assistance from HRSP Historian Dr. Christopher Hayden and 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 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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