



HRSP NEWSLETTER

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

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Georgia Man Convicted of Concealing Participation in Persecution During the Ethiopian “Red Terror”

On July 26, a federal jury in the Northern District of Georgia convicted a Georgia man of fraudulently obtaining U.S. citizenship by lying about his role in persecuting teenagers in Ethiopia for their political opinions.

According to court documents and evidence presented at trial, Mezemr Abebe Belayneh, 67, of Snellville, Georgia, unlawfully obtained U.S. citizenship in 2008 by lying about and concealing that he persecuted and committed acts of violence against political opponents during a period known as “the Red Terror” in Ethiopia. The Red Terror was a campaign of brutal violence in the late 1970s in which Ethiopia’s ruling military council and its supporters detained, interrogated, tortured, and executed thousands of perceived political opponents.

“The Department of Justice is committed to protecting human rights, and those who commit atrocities will not find safe refuge in the United States,” said Assistant Attorney General Kenneth A. Polite, Jr. of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. “Thanks to the courage of the victims of these horrible abuses and the persistence of investigators and prosecutors, Mezemr Abebe Belayneh is finally facing justice for the violence he inflicted on young people in Ethiopia 45 years ago.”

“The jury’s verdict is aligned with our commitment to holding accountable human rights violators who lie to enter the United States,” said U.S. Attorney Ryan K. Buchanan for the Northern District of Georgia. “We are grateful for the remarkable effort and perseverance of our law enforcement partners, who sought justice for the courageous victims, several of whom provided testimony of oppressive violence during the trial.”

During the Red Terror, Belayneh served as a civilian interrogator at a makeshift prison known as Menafesha in the city of Dilla, Ethiopia. Belayneh detained teenage victims in a crowded prison for weeks or months, interrogated them about their political beliefs, and directed and participated in severe beatings in which they were whipped or hit with sticks. Belayneh also forced prisoners to physically fight one another for the prison guards’ amusement. Belayneh concealed that conduct when he obtained a visa to enter the United States in 2001 and when he naturalized to become a U.S. citizen in 2008.

“Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) is committed to identifying and apprehending human rights violators who try to evade justice by seeking shelter in the United States,” said Acting Special Agent in Charge Travis Pickard, who oversees HSI operations in Georgia and Alabama. “The United States is not a safe haven for these criminals, and we will never stop looking for them or seeking justice for their victims.”

The jury convicted Belayneh of one count of procuring citizenship contrary to law and one count of procuring citizenship to which he was not entitled. He is scheduled to be sentenced on November 30th and faces a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison for each count. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

HSI Atlanta investigated the case, with coordination 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 mutilation, and the use or recruitment of child soldiers.

Trial Attorney Patrick Jasperse of the Criminal Division's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP) and Assistant U.S. Attorney Tal C. Chaiken for the Northern District of Georgia prosecuted the case, with assistance from HRSP Senior Historian Dr. Christopher Hayden. The Justice Department's Office of International Affairs also provided significant assistance.

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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