



HRSP NEWSLETTER

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

May 2024

This year, sentences were issued in two important human rights violators prosecutions brought by the Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP) and our prosecutorial and investigative partners. Details of the cases are below.

Man Sentenced to Prison for Torture and Illegally Exporting Weapons Parts and Related Services to Iraq

On April 15, a Pennsylvania man was sentenced to 70 years in prison for torturing an Estonian citizen and illegally exporting weapons parts and related services in 2015 in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Roggio was the second defendant to be convicted of torture since the federal torture statute went into effect in 1994.

According to court documents and evidence presented at trial, Ross Roggio, 55, of Stroudsburg, arranged for Kurdish soldiers to abduct and detain the victim at a Kurdish military compound, where Roggio suffocated the victim with a belt, threatened to cut off one of his fingers, and directed Kurdish soldiers to repeatedly beat, choke, tase, and otherwise physically and mentally abuse the victim over a 39-day period. The victim was an employee at a weapons factory that Roggio was developing in the Kurdistan region of Iraq that was intended to manufacture automatic rifles and pistols.

“Ross Roggio had his victim abducted and detained at a Kurdish military compound in Iraq, where Roggio and others physically and mentally tortured the victim over the course of 39 days,” said Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Nicole M. Argentieri, head of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. “During that time, Roggio suffocated the victim and directed others to beat, choke, and tase him. Roggio’s victim worked at a weapons factory in Iraq, where Roggio illegally sent weapons parts and illegally provided services, in violation of export controls laws. Today’s sentence—following the second-ever conviction under the federal torture statute—shows that, no matter where such deplorable acts occur, the United States is committed to holding the perpetrators accountable.”

In connection with the weapons factory project, Roggio exported firearms parts and tools without the required approvals by the U.S. government. He also illegally trained foreign persons in the operation, assembly, and manufacturing of the M4 automatic rifle.

A federal jury [convicted](#) Roggio in May 2023 of 33 counts of torture, conspiracy to commit torture, conspiracy to commit an offense against the United States, exporting weapons parts and services to Iraq without the approval of the U.S. Department of State, exporting weapons tools to Iraq without the approval of the U.S. Department of Commerce, smuggling goods, wire fraud, and money laundering.

Trial Attorney Patrick Jasperse of the Criminal Division’s Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section, Trial Attorney Scott A. Claffee of the National Security Division’s Counterintelligence and Export Control Section, and Assistant U.S. Attorney Todd K. Hinkley for the Middle District of Pennsylvania prosecuted the case. The FBI and Homeland Security Investigation (HSI) investigated the torture and were joined in the investigation of the arms export violations by the Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security, Office of Export Enforcement. The Estonian Internal Security Service, Justice Department’s Office of International Affairs, and Pennsylvania State Police also provided valuable assistance.

Human Rights Violator Sentenced for Immigration Fraud and U.S. Citizenship Revoked

On February 29, a Georgia man was sentenced to three years in prison for unlawfully obtaining U.S. citizenship by lying about his role in persecuting teenagers in Ethiopia in the 1970s for their political opinions.

According to court documents, Mezemr Abebe Belayneh, also known as Mezmur Amare Belayneh, 68, of Snellville, unlawfully obtained U.S. citizenship in 2008 by lying about and concealing that he had persecuted and committed acts of violence against perceived 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 civilians.

“Mezemr Belayneh violently beat political opponents in Ethiopia and lied about it to U.S. immigration authorities. Through this deception, he unlawfully entered this country and obtained U.S. citizenship,” said Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Nicole M. Argentieri of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. “Individuals who persecuted people in their home countries should take note: if you seek refuge unlawfully in the United States, we will investigate and prosecute you.”

During the Red Terror, Belayneh served as a civilian interrogator at a makeshift prison housed in a hotel known as Menafesha in Dilla, Ethiopia. According to witness testimony, Belayneh interrogated victims about their political beliefs, and directed and participated in severe beatings in which they were whipped or hit with sticks while imprisoned in Dilla. Belayneh concealed this conduct when he obtained a visa to enter the United States in 2001 and when he applied to become a naturalized U.S. citizen in 2008.

A federal jury [convicted](#) Belayneh in July 2023 of one count of procuring citizenship contrary to law and one count of procuring citizenship to which he was not entitled. In addition to his prison sentence, Belayneh’s U.S. citizenship was also revoked.

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.

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.

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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 either 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 or complete the FBI online tip form at <https://www.ice.gov/webform/ice-tip-form> or the FBI online tip form at <https://tips.fbi.gov/>.

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