

## **IWU teacher writing about being political prisoner in Ethiopia**

**By Steve Arney**

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In the cafeteria at Atkin-Colby Hall, among a group from the Illinois State University International House, a conversation had turned to Ethiopia.

A young woman from nearby heard Ethiopia and chimed in. As recalled by professor Taye Woldesmiate:

Woman: "What happened to that Ethiopian guy I signed a card for?"

Someone at the table: "Here he is, right in front of you."

"She was so happy," said Dr. Taye, as he is known internationally. And so was Taye on this day in 2002, having been recently released from an Ethiopian prison as a result of the international pressure exerted by friends and by strangers like the woman in the cafeteria.

Taye had served six years in prison in Ethiopia for insurrection and terrorism. It was accepted fact outside the official Ethiopian government story - accepted by groups such as Amnesty International -- that the charges were false and that he was a political prisoner because of his outspokenness as a union leader.

He now teaches at Illinois Wesleyan University. His long-term future is in flux, but short-term he is preparing to chronicle his story. A book is in draft form, said Taye. (Ethiopians go by their first names in formal references.)

He wants to soften the book, shape it into more of a narrative and less of an academic study. He wants to release it in English-language and Amharic-language versions as general reading, instead of producing a college text.

He wants the average person on the street to know that signing a petition really means something, even regarding a dictatorial government in a far-away nation.

His dear friend, the late Marilyn Boyd, was administrator at Illinois State University's International House and started the Free Taye movement in 1996.

High school and college students had signed cards, letters and petitions to congressmen in support of Taye. Teachers advocated. The European Union put pressure on Ethiopia, as did the international labor movement.

Led by Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, 82 congressmen signed a bipartisan petition demanding that the

government of Ethiopia release him.

"The participation of the public was crucial," said the professor. "It wasn't worth keeping me in jail."

Now 53, Taye calls Bloomington-Normal his second home.

He had come here, to Illinois State University, through the international studies program in 1979.

Back home, Haile Selassie had been deposed as emperor five years earlier and replaced by a military junta. A Marxist dictator, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, came to power and unleashed years of crackdown known as the "Red Terror."

During Taye's time here, Ethiopia fought a separatist war with Eritrea and a war with Somalia. Famine killed hundreds of thousands if not a million people, and made Ethiopia synonymous in the West with starving children.

Taye earned a bachelor's and master's degree from ISU. In 1988, he received a doctorate from the University of Missouri.

By then, he said, repression had lightened considerably in Ethiopia. The Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc were in decline, and Ethiopia was turning to a mixed economy, he noted.

Taye had studied economics and agriculture as well as politics and international relations, and it put him in demand for his forward-looking homeland. He was hired by the University of Addis Ababa in 1989.

More upheaval would follow shortly.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) seized the capital in 1991 and Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe. But the name of the new governing party didn't make it democratic.

Its leaders have controlled the government since. While they ceded some power with multiparty elections in 2005, post-election protests, which alleged rigged voting, were marked by beatings, jailings and killings.

Various activists have been targeted throughout EPRDF's rule -- Taye as an education leader.

At the university, Taye rose to the presidency of the nation's teachers union, the Ethiopian Teachers Association (ETA), and ETA and the government came into grave conflict.

The central issue reported by Taye involved a government plan to regionalize the education system and divide it along ethnic lines. The teachers union thought a national system was vital to quality, universal values, consistency and cohesion in a multiethnic land.

"I think they used a colonial concept of divide and rule," said Taye. "I saw the danger of Rwanda if we segregated based on ethnicity."

He was incarcerated in 1996 on terrorism and insurgency charges and eventually sentenced to a 15-year term.

The first three years, he said, were brutal.

"It was really ugly. For the first three years, I was in chains."

Taye said he was kept in solitary confinement with just 50 minutes per week for showering and walking outside of his cell. Guards taunted and threatened him and woke him in the night to harass him, he said. He received no mail.

Taye said constant exercise and a devotion to resistance kept him sane.

"I was determined to fight them. They think they're going to drive me crazy. I constantly believed I had to fight it out. I'm not budging."

He credits international pressure from Amnesty International and others for improvements in conditions during his final three years. Out of solitary, Taye received visits from observers and family, and they could bring him good food. The mail came in floods from friends and strangers.

Those last years also saw a shift in leadership in Ethiopia.

He said he greeted a new cellmate one day this way: "Welcome, prime minister."

Tamrat Layne, the prime minister whose regime trumped up the charges against Dr. Taye, had been deposed and charged with corruption.

This is a lesson in the virtue of democracy, as they could disagree but agree to disagree, and they became friends, said Taye. Democracy, he said, always means tolerating what you find disagreeable.

There was something refreshing in meeting Tamrat under those awful conditions, as none had an upper hand. "You come to the earth and discuss things, without power -- and we wished the current prime minister was there to discuss with us."

Taye taught two years at Illinois State University before coming to Wesleyan under a program called the Scholars at Risk Network.

His visa expires in August, but he believes a return to Ethiopia now would mean a return to prison, given the post-election crackdown which started in 2005.

More struggle is to come. That's the only way people win rights, said the teacher.

"Democracy costs you - even with your life sometimes."

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# Still repressed

Human rights abuses reported in Ethiopia during 2006 included:

- Limitation on citizens' right to change their government during the most recent elections
- Unlawful killings, and beating, abuse and mistreatment of detainees and opposition supporters by security forces
- Poor prison conditions
- Arbitrary arrest and detention, particularly those suspected of sympathizing with or being members of the opposition
- Detention of thousands without charge and lengthy pretrial detention
- Infringement on citizens' privacy rights and frequent refusal to follow the law regarding search warrants
- Restrictions on freedom of the press
- Arrest, detention and harassment of journalists for publishing articles critical of the government
- Restrictions on freedom of assembly
- Limitations on freedom of association
- Violence and societal discrimination against women and abuse of children
- Female genital mutilation
- Exploitation of children for economic and sexual purposes
- Trafficking in people
- Societal discrimination against people with disabilities and religious and ethnic minorities
- Government interference in union activities

*SOURCE: U.S. State Department on Ethiopia*