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**Department of Justice**

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**Ethiopian Human Rights Abuser Sentenced for Fraudulently Obtaining U.S. Citizenship by 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 was sentenced to 37 months in prison for having fraudulently obtained U.S. citizenship.

Assistant Attorney General Brian A. Benczkowski of the Justice Department's Criminal Division, U.S. Attorney G. Zachary Terwilliger of the Eastern District of Virginia and Special Agent in Charge Patrick J. Lechleitner of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Washington, D.C made the announcement.

Mergia Negussie Habteyes, 58, previously pleaded guilty to one count of unlawful procurement of naturalization. Negussie was sentenced by U.S. District Judge T.S. Ellis III of the Eastern District of Virginia.

"Negussie-Habteyes believed he could conceal his past participation in the brutal persecution of political dissidents in order to enjoy the benefits of U.S. citizenship and escape accountability in Ethiopia," said Assistant Attorney General Benczkowski. "This case demonstrates the Justice Department's continued commitment to ensuring that the United States does not become a safe haven for human rights violators."

"Negussie hid his past atrocities as a human rights abuser and lied his way into the United States," said U.S. Attorney Terwilliger. "United States citizenship and the protections and privileges that accompany it is not intended for those who persecute their fellow man. My thanks to the prosecutors and law enforcement agents and officers for their outstanding work on this case."

According to admissions in the plea agreement, Negussie participated in the persecution of detainees in Ethiopia from roughly 1977 to 1978 during a period of time known as the "Red Terror." As part of actions led by a council of military officers in power at the time, known as the "Derg," Negussie injured and abused detainees on account of their political opinion by beating them with weapons including belts, rods and other objects, causing permanent scarring and injury to some of the detainees. During these beatings, Negussie questioned the detainees about their affiliation with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the opposition activities of the EPRP, which was politically opposed to the Derg.

Negussie was able to come to the United States in 1999 by telling a series of lies to U.S. immigration authorities. He ultimately obtained U.S. citizenship in 2008. He ultimately obtained U.S. citizenship in 2008. At his plea hearing, Negussie specifically admitted that, during his sworn naturalization interview, he falsely stated that he 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. In fact, as Negussie admitted, he had participated in the persecution and assaults against individuals imprisoned because of their political opinion. Additionally, Negussie admitted that he falsely stated that he never gave false or misleading information to any U.S. government official while applying for any immigration benefit

and falsely stated that he never lied to U.S. immigration authorities to gain entry or admission into the United States and to obtain immigration benefits.

Negussie's materially false representations in sworn statements to U.S. immigration officials resulted in his procurement of naturalization contrary to law. In addition to sentencing Negussie to a period of incarceration, Negussie's U.S. citizenship was also revoked.

The case was investigated by ICE HSI Washington, D.C. and Sterling, Virginia Field Office with the support of 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 genital mutilation and the use or recruitment of child soldiers. The HRVWCC leverages the expertise of a select group of agents, lawyers, intelligence and research specialists, historians and analysts who direct the government's broader enforcement efforts against these offenders. The HRVWCC is comprised of ICE HSI's Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Unit, ICE's Human Rights Law Section, FBI's International Human Rights Unit and the Justice Department's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP).

The case was jointly prosecuted by Trial Attorney Jamie Perry of the Criminal Division's HRSP and Assistant U.S. Attorney Alexander Blanchard of the Eastern District of Virginia.

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](http://www.ice.gov/exec/forms/hsi-tips/tips.asp).

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